

Women Safety and Empowerment: Myth and Reality

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Abstract:

women are the most important at the same time most vulnerable section in the society. Their many efforts through the various policies to bring out equality but still unable to achieve this in a significant manner. In the name of empowerment, women are becoming victims and more vulnerable section in patriarchal society. Specially, the educated women is struggling to come out of her traditional and prescribed role even though she is in a good position at her workplace. When it comes to the safety of women, though she is protected by many laws and policies the positive outcomes of all these are very negligible. Women harassment at her workplace has increased, dowry deaths are still exists. The present article explain some of the areas where the women are facing various challenges and struggles in the patriarchal society.

Keywords: Women empowerment, patriarchy, gender roles, vulnerable section etc.

Introduction:

Women's safety and empowerment in India present a complex landscape where significant progress coexists with persistent challenges. In recent years, Indian women have increasingly asserted themselves across all sectors—business, politics, science, sports and so on, demonstrating remarkable leadership and talent. This visible empowerment, however, it is often overshadowed by ongoing concerns about safety and security, both in public and private spaces.

While India's legal architecture for women's safety and empowerment is among the most comprehensive in the world, the reality on the ground is shaped by societal attitudes, institutional inertia, and gaps in enforcement. Bridging this gap requires sustained political will, community engagement, and a multi-pronged approach that goes beyond legislation to transform mindsets and systems. The Government of India has responded to this situation with women's safety and well-being with a multi-pronged strategy, enacting legal reforms, launching financial initiatives like the Nirbhaya Fund, and establishing support systems such as One Stop Centres, emergency helplines, and fast-track courts to address crimes against women. These measures aim to provide immediate assistance, legal recourse, and psychological support for survivors of violence and harassment. For example, over 10.8 lakh women have received help from One Stop Centres since 2015, reflecting the scale of both the challenge and the response.

Despite these efforts, the reality on the ground remains sobering. Surveys and crime data reveal that many women still feel unsafe, especially in public spaces and at night times and incidents of violence—including sexual assault, domestic abuse, and dowry-related crimes—continue to be reported at high rates from both urban and rural areas. This persistent sense of vulnerability undermines the broader goal of genuine empowerment, as true progress can only occur when women are free from constant fear about their safety and be able to participate fully in the society.

The gap between policy and lived experience highlights the need for not just robust laws and infrastructure, but also a transformation in societal attitudes and greater community engagement. Until every woman can move freely and confidently in all spheres of life, the vision of women's safety and empowerment will remain a work in progress!

Legal Framework Exists, but Implementation Lags

Many countries in the developing world have established comprehensive laws for women's safety and empowerment, such as the Women's Reservation Act and laws against domestic violence and sexual harassment. India, as a fast developing nation, has developed a robust legal framework to promote **women's safety and empowerment**, with landmark laws such as the Women's Reservation Act, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act (POSH). These laws are designed to address issues ranging from political representation to domestic violence and workplace harassment, reflecting a commitment to gender equality at the domestic, economic and political levels.

However, the real challenge lies not in the absence of laws, but in their effective implementation, awareness, and enforcement. Despite the existence of these comprehensive legal protections, women in India continue to face significant threats to their safety and barriers to true empowerment.

Safety Remains a Major Concern

Despite the existence of robust legal protections, crimes such as rape, torture, dowry deaths, and other forms of violence against women remain alarmingly prevalent in India. The scale of the problem is reflected in recent data: in 2022, over 4.45 lakh cases of crimes against women were registered, which translates to nearly 51 FIRs every hour. These figures include a wide spectrum of offenses—domestic violence, assault, dowry harassment, rape, molestation, and criminal intimidation—demonstrating the pervasive nature of gender-based violence.

Domestic violence continues to top the list of reported crimes. In the first few months of 2025 alone, the National Commission for Women (NCW) received 1,594 complaints of domestic violence, accounting for nearly 20% of all grievances. Dowry harassment remains a significant issue, with 916 complaints, while rape and attempted rape accounted for 394 cases in the same period. These statistics, however, only represent the cases that are reported—many more incidents go unreported due to fear, stigma, and lack of support.

Rape and sexual assault are particularly grave concerns. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, one woman is raped every 20 minutes in India. In 2022, there were over 30,000 reported rapes, but experts and activists believe the actual number is much higher, as many survivors choose not to come forward. The psychological and physical consequences of such violence are profound, often leading to chronic health issues, depression, anxiety, and even suicide.

Dowry deaths and torture also persist, despite strict laws like the Dowry Prohibition Act. The social acceptance of practices such as dowry, child marriage, and honor killings further exacerbates the problem, especially in regions where patriarchal values remain entrenched. The persistence of these crimes highlights a disconnect between legal provisions and societal attitudes.

Many women in India feel their safety is constantly under threat, whether in public spaces, at home, or in the workplace. This pervasive sense of insecurity fundamentally undermines genuine empowerment. When women are forced to alter their behavior, restrict their movements, or remain silent out of fear, their

ability to participate fully in society, pursue education or employment, and exercise their rights is severely curtailed.

Challenges to Implementation

The following are the major hurdles or challenges in the way of effective implementation of laws to guard safety of women:-

Delayed Justice System: The legal process in India is often slow and cumbersome. Victims of gender-based crimes face prolonged court cases, which can take years to get resolved. This delay discourages many women from seeking justice and erodes trust in the system.

Lax Law Enforcement: A significant portion of law enforcement personnel display apathy or disbelief towards complaints of violence against women. This attitude leads to inadequate investigation and support for victims, perpetuating a culture of impunity.

Societal and Cultural Barriers: Deep-rooted patriarchal norms and societal pressures often deter women from reporting crimes or seeking help. Fear of social stigma, victim-blaming, and family pressure contribute to underreporting and silence.

Lack of Awareness: Many women are unaware of their legal rights and the protections available to them. This lack of awareness is particularly acute among rural-dwelling and marginalized communities, limiting the reach and impact of progressive laws.

Inadequate Infrastructure: Public spaces often lack adequate safety measures such as lighting, CCTV surveillance, and safe transportation options. This increases vulnerability and restricts women's mobility and participation in public life.

Half-hearted Implementation: Even where laws exist, their enforcement is inconsistent. For example, the POSH Act requires every workplace to have an Internal Committee to handle complaints of sexual harassment, but many organizations fail to comply or treat the process as a mere formality.

Limited Support Services: Victims of domestic violence and harassment often lack access to shelters, counselling, and legal aid. Institutional support is insufficient, especially in smaller towns and rural areas. Although the government in many states like in Karnataka has set up Homes for battered women along with free legal help, lack of awareness about their existence and other limitations have resulted in poor usage by affected women.

Political and Administrative Resistance: The implementation of policies like the Women's Reservation Act has faced political resistance and administrative bottlenecks, slowing down the progress towards gender-balanced representation.

Ineffective Utilization of Funds: Government initiatives such as the Nirbhaya Fund, meant to enhance women's safety, have seen poor utilization, with less than half of allocated resources being used effectively.

Exclusion of Informal Sector Workers: Most women in India work in the informal sector, where enforcement of workplace safety and harassment laws is virtually non-existent. These women are often left without recourse or protection.

Economic Dependence and Poverty

The most significant hurdle in this regard is economic vulnerability of women and their dependence upon the husband for meeting basic needs and for survival. Lack of asset ownership (like agricultural land, house and house site, livestock and family enterprises, access to ancestral property etc), illiteracy or semi-

literacy, lack of employment in the formal organized sector, burden of early marriage, child birth and illhealth – all are responsible for the subjugation of women in the family and community. even educated and employed women lack ownership of economic assets that has made them depend upon family males.

Empowerment Is Multidimensional but Often Superficial

True empowerment for women extends far beyond economic or political quotas. It encompasses self-esteem, decision-making power, access to resources, and the ability to influence social change. However, in practice, many initiatives in India and globally tend to focus on measurable targets—such as financial inclusion or reserved seats in legislatures—without adequately addressing the deeper social and cultural barriers that limit genuine empowerment.

Components of True Empowerment

According to the United Nations and the European Institute for Gender Equality, women's empowerment involves five core components:

Sense of self-worth: Women must value themselves and their contributions to society.

Right to make choices: Empowerment requires the freedom to make personal and professional decisions.

Access to opportunities and resources: This includes education, healthcare, employment, and property rights.

Control over one's life: Women should have autonomy both within and outside the home.

Ability to influence social change: Empowerment is incomplete without the capacity to shape societal norms and policies.

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The Gap between Policy and Reality

Despite a range of government schemes—such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, National Mission for Empowerment of Women, and the Nirbhaya Fund—there remains a significant disconnect between policy

intent and lived reality. These programs have contributed to improvements in areas like the sex ratio at birth and girls' school enrollment, but they often do not dismantle the patriarchal attitudes that underpin gender inequality.

Key challenges include:

Superficial Focus: Many initiatives prioritize numbers—like the percentage of women in parliament or the number of women given business loans—over deeper change. Such quotas can be symbolic if women lack real influence or if their participation is restricted by social expectations.

Cultural Barriers: Deep-seated beliefs about gender roles persist, especially in rural and traditional communities. Women may have legal rights but still face pressure to conform to restrictive norms regarding marriage, mobility, and career choices.

Decision-Making Power: Even when women are financially independent or politically active, they may have limited say in household or community decisions due to entrenched patriarchal structures.

Access to Resources: While there are policies to improve access to education, healthcare, and employment, many women—especially from marginalized groups—still struggle to benefit from these resources due to discrimination, lack of information, or logistical barriers.

Social Influence: True empowerment requires women to have a voice in shaping laws, policies, and social norms. However, a lack of representation in leadership roles and public life often limits their ability to effect change at a systemic level.

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The Way Forward

To bridge the gap between **law and practice**, India must focus on:

- **Strengthening the justice system** for timely and sensitive resolution of cases.
- **Training law enforcement** and judiciary to handle gender-based crimes with empathy and urgency.
- **Raising public awareness** through education and outreach, especially among rural and marginalized communities.
- **Improving infrastructure** to make public spaces safer for women.
- **Ensuring strict compliance** with workplace safety laws and holding organizations accountable.
- **Expanding support services** such as shelters, helplines, and legal aid for victims.

The reasons for the continued prevalence of violence against women are complex. Hence, the government and civil society organizations must strive to address the following:

- **Patriarchal mindsets and regressive value systems** that normalize or excuse violence.
- **Inadequate implementation of laws** and lack of accountability for perpetrators.
- **Social stigma and victim-blaming**, which discourage reporting and seeking justice.
- **Limited access to support services**, such as shelters, counselling, and legal aid, especially in rural areas.
- **Insufficient gender-sensitivity training** among law enforcement and healthcare providers.

Besides the above, there is also the Need for Cultural and Social Transformation. For empowerment to be genuine and sustainable, it must be rooted in **social transformation**:

Education and Awareness: Raising awareness about women's rights and challenging stereotypes from an early age is crucial.

Community Engagement: Both men and women must be involved in efforts to shift attitudes and behaviours.

Support Systems: Legal aid, counselling, safe spaces, and mentorship are vital for women to overcome barriers and assert their rights.

Grassroots Movements: Local women's organizations play a key role in advocating for change and holding institutions accountable.

While India has made notable progress in women's empowerment through policy and programmatic interventions, **true empowerment remains elusive without addressing the underlying social and cultural barriers.** It is only when women have real self-esteem, decision-making power, access to resources, and social influence that empowerment becomes a lived reality, rather than a statistical achievement

Myth: Laws Alone Guarantee Safety and Equality

The existence of laws does not automatically translate into safety or equality. Social attitudes, lack of awareness, and resistance to change mean that many women do not experience the rights guaranteed on paper.

Socio-economic Status Influences Safety and Empowerment

Women with independent income sources are significantly more likely to report violence and seek help. Economic empowerment is crucial, but many women lack access to skills, training, and employment

opportunities.

Urban-Rural Divide

Women's safety and empowerment vary widely between urban and rural areas. Urban centers may offer better infrastructure and opportunities, but rural women often face more severe restrictions and risks.

Cultural Myths and Stereotypes Persist

Myths such as "women can't lead" or "violence against women is culturally accepted" still influence attitudes and behaviors, despite evidence and advocacy to the contrary.

Political Representation Is Still Limited

While legislative measures like seat reservations for women exist, actual representation and influence remain limited. The impact of such measures is often delayed or diluted by political and bureaucratic processes.

Violence Is Gendered and Disproportionate

Although men also face violence, women are disproportionately affected by gender-based violence, including domestic abuse, sexual exploitation, and harmful cultural practices. One in three women globally experiences physical or sexual violence in her lifetime.

Conclusion:

In conclusion we can say that empowerment requires Societal Change and not just state policy. Lasting change depends on shifting societal attitudes, engaging men as allies, promoting gender-sensitive education, and ensuring women's voices are heard in all spheres. Empowerment is not just a policy goal but also, a societal transformation. "Despite laws, processes, and institutions established to protect the rights of women and girls, the reality is that women in all contexts across this planet continue to experience violence, oppression, and inequality."

While the government has launched initiatives like One Stop Centres, women's helplines, and Mission Shakti to provide integrated support and improve safety, the gap between policy and reality remains significant. Many survivors continue to suffer in silence, and the broader public health and societal consequences of this violence are profound.

The persistence of violence against women in India, despite strong legal frameworks, reveals the urgent need for not just stronger enforcement and support systems, but also a fundamental shift in societal attitudes and behaviors. Only by addressing these deep-rooted issues can lead towards genuine safety and empowerment for women can be achieved.

In summary, while significant progress has been made in legal and policy frameworks for women's safety and empowerment, the reality is that deep-rooted social, economic, and cultural barriers persist. Bridging the gap between myth and reality requires not just laws but a comprehensive transformation of attitudes, systems, and opportunities for women at every level of society.

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