

Malaviya's Principles on Women's Emancipation and Gen Z Aspirations: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Women's empowerment in India has evolved from historically rooted, value-based conceptions of emancipation to contemporary perspectives emphasizing individual agency, economic autonomy, equality, and freedom of choice. This study comparatively examines Madan Mohan Malaviya's principles of women's emancipation and the aspirations of Generation Z (Gen Z), with particular emphasis on education, economic empowerment, gender equality, and social roles. The study adopts a quantitative, descriptive, and analytical research design based on primary data collected through a structured questionnaire from 70 Gen Z respondents aged 18-26 years from urban and semi-urban backgrounds. Using Likert-scale responses, the study examines four dimensions of empowerment and employs descriptive statistics, a composite empowerment index, correlation analysis, and one-sample *t*-tests. The findings indicate that Gen Z strongly recognizes the continuing relevance of Malaviya's emphasis on women's education (Mean = 4.27) and women's contribution to nation-building (Mean = 4.16). At the same time, respondents acknowledge that contemporary concepts of empowerment have expanded beyond Malaviya's original vision, particularly through greater emphasis on individual freedom, financial independence, and gender equality (Mean = 4.04). A synthesized framework integrating traditional value-based foundations with modern agency and economic autonomy may provide a more inclusive and contextually relevant approach to women's empowerment in India.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Generation Z, Gender Equality, Economic Empowerment, Women's Education and India

Introduction

Women's empowerment has emerged as a central theme in contemporary development discourse, particularly in the pursuit of inclusive growth and gender equality. In India, although significant progress has been made in improving female literacy, access to education, and policy support, persistent challenges such as low female labour force participation, wage inequality, and limited decision-making power continue to constrain women's full economic potential. From a theoretical standpoint, empowerment is understood as the expansion of individual capabilities and freedoms, enabling people to lead lives they value (Sen, 1999). Similarly, empowerment has been conceptualized as a process through which individuals gain the ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where this ability was previously

restricted (Kabeer, 1999). Empirical studies further highlight that women's economic empowerment contributes not only to individual welfare but also to broader economic development and growth (Duflo, 2012; Klasen & Lamanna, 2009).

In this context, revisiting indigenous intellectual traditions provides valuable insights into alternative frameworks of empowerment. The ideas of Madan Mohan Malaviya offer a significant foundation for such an exploration. As a prominent educationist, nationalist leader, and social reformer, Malaviya emphasized education as a transformative tool for both individual and societal progress (Malaviya, 1916/2010). He strongly advocated women's education as a means to achieve economic independence, social dignity, and moral development. His vision of empowerment extended beyond material well-being to include ethical conduct, social responsibility, and active participation in nation-building (Vaidya, 2012). This holistic approach resonates with broader development perspectives that stress the importance of human capital formation and value-based progress.

Malaviya's framework of women's emancipation was multidimensional, integrating economic self-reliance with moral and ethical development. He emphasized dignity of labour and the importance of self-sufficiency, aligning with the idea that empowerment should enhance both economic capabilities and social agency. Such a perspective finds support in contemporary research, which suggests that education and employment are critical determinants of women's empowerment and overall economic development (Goldin, 2014). However, while Malaviya's ideas were progressive in their historical context, it is important to examine their relevance in the rapidly changing socio-economic environment of the present.

The emergence of Generation Z (Gen Z), broadly defined as individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, reflects a significant shift in aspirations and value systems. This generation has grown up in an era characterized by globalization, digitalization, and the expansion of new economic opportunities. As a result, Gen Z demonstrates a strong inclination toward financial independence, entrepreneurial ventures, and skill-based education (Schroth, 2019; Francis & Hoefel, 2018). The rise of the gig economy and digital platforms has further reshaped employment patterns, offering flexibility and autonomy while also introducing new forms of economic uncertainty (International Labour Organization, 2023).

At the same time, Gen Z's approach to values and ethics appears to be more pragmatic compared to earlier generations. While there is increased awareness of issues such as gender equality and sustainability, economic decisions are often influenced by considerations of income maximization, career advancement, and global mobility (Twenge, 2017). This shift reflects broader structural changes in labour markets and economic systems, where individual aspirations are increasingly shaped by global opportunities and competitive environments. National-level data sources such as the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) and National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) further highlight evolving trends in women's employment, education, and financial inclusion in India.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to undertake a comparative analysis of Malaviya's principles on women's emancipation and the aspirations of Gen Z in India. By combining conceptual analysis with empirical evidence derived from primary survey data, the study aims to identify areas of convergence and divergence between traditional and modern perspectives. Such an analysis is essential for understanding how classical ideas can be reinterpreted to address contemporary challenges. Moreover, it contributes to bridging the gap between indigenous economic thought and modern development paradigms, thereby offering a more comprehensive framework for women's empowerment.

The discourse on women's empowerment has evolved significantly over time, reflecting shifts in economic structures, social norms, and generational aspirations. While classical thinkers like Madan Mohan Malaviya emphasized a holistic and value-driven approach to emancipation, contemporary youth, particularly Generation Z, exhibit aspirations shaped by modern economic realities and global exposure. This divergence calls for a systematic examination of both perspectives to assess their relevance and applicability in the current context.

Objectives are as follow: -

1. To critically examine Malaviya's vision of women's empowerment.
2. To assess the economic and social aspirations of Gen Z regarding empowerment.
3. To analyse the relevance of traditional empowerment principles in the modern socio-economic context.

In conclusion, while the socio-economic context has undergone significant transformation, the core principles of education, self-reliance, and ethical development continue to retain their relevance. However, their interpretation and application must evolve in line with changing aspirations and opportunities. By examining the intersection of Malaviya's vision and Gen Z perspectives, this study aims to provide meaningful insights into the future trajectory of women's empowerment in India.

Literature Review

The literature on women's empowerment has evolved significantly, moving from narrow economic interpretations to more comprehensive, multidimensional frameworks. Foundational contributions by (Sen, 1999) conceptualize development as an expansion of capabilities, emphasizing that empowerment lies in enhancing individuals' freedoms and choices. Similarly, Kabeer (1999) frames empowerment as a process involving resources, agency, and achievements. While these frameworks provide a strong theoretical foundation, they have often been criticized for their broad and abstract nature, which makes empirical measurement challenging, particularly in diverse socio-cultural contexts like India. Further attempts to operationalize empowerment have been made through multidimensional frameworks that incorporate economic, social, and decision-making indicators (Malhotra et al., 2002).

To address this limitation, subsequent studies have attempted to operationalize empowerment through measurable indicators such as education, employment, and income. (Duflo, 2012) argues that women's empowerment and economic development are mutually reinforcing, yet she also cautions against assuming a linear relationship between the two. This challenges earlier development narratives that treated economic growth as a sufficient condition for empowerment. Similarly, (Klasen and Lamanna, 2009) empirically demonstrate that gender inequality in education and employment hampers economic growth, thereby reinforcing the need for gender-inclusive policies. However, such macro-level analyses often overlook intra-household dynamics and localized constraints, which play a crucial role in shaping women's actual agency.

In this regard, (Agarwal, 1997) provides a critical intervention by emphasizing the importance of bargaining power within households. Her work highlights that access to resources alone does not guarantee empowerment unless women have control over those resources. This perspective exposes a key limitation in mainstream empowerment literature, which tends to equate participation with empowerment, ignoring underlying power relations. Further extending this critique, (Goldin, 2014) introduces the concept of "gender convergence" but acknowledges that structural barriers such as occupational segregation and social norms continue to restrict women's full participation in labour markets. Jayachandran (2015)

deepens this argument by identifying cultural and social norms as persistent determinants of gender inequality, suggesting that economic interventions alone may be insufficient to achieve meaningful empowerment.

In the Indian context, empirical evidence from large-scale surveys such as the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) (Government of India, 2021) and the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) (Government of India, 2023) reveals a paradoxical trend: while women's educational attainment and financial inclusion have improved, labour force participation remains relatively low. This indicates a disconnect between capability enhancement and actual economic outcomes, thereby questioning the effectiveness of existing policy frameworks. Reports by the World Bank (2022) and the International Labour Organization (2023) similarly emphasize the persistence of informal employment and gender disparities, highlighting the need for more targeted and context-specific interventions. However, these policy-oriented studies often adopt a technocratic approach, focusing on measurable outcomes while neglecting the ethical and cultural dimensions of empowerment.

It is within this gap that the ideas of Madan Mohan Malaviya assume significance. Unlike contemporary economic frameworks that prioritize measurable indicators, Malaviya's vision of women's emancipation was inherently holistic and value-driven, integrating education, self-reliance, and moral development (Malaviya, 1916/2010; Vaidya, 2012). His emphasis on ethical conduct and social responsibility offers an alternative perspective that complements modern approaches. However, a major limitation in existing literature is the lack of systematic engagement with such indigenous thought in empirical research, leading to an incomplete understanding of empowerment in the Indian context. Parallel to this, emerging literature on Generation Z provides insights into the shifting aspirations of contemporary youth. Studies suggest that Gen Z prioritizes financial independence, career flexibility, and entrepreneurial opportunities, shaped largely by digitalization and globalization (Schroth, 2019; Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Twenge (2017) further argues that this generation exhibits a more individualistic and pragmatic orientation, often valuing personal success over collective or ethical considerations. While this reflects adaptation to modern economic realities, it also raises concerns about the erosion of value-based frameworks that earlier thinkers emphasized.

Despite the richness of both strands of literature classical empowerment theory and contemporary youth studies there remains a major gap. Existing research tends to examine these domains in isolation, without exploring their intersections. In particular, there is limited scholarly effort to compare traditional value-based frameworks of empowerment with the aspirations of modern generations, especially in the context of women's emancipation. This lack of integration restricts the development of a comprehensive framework that can address both structural and cultural dimensions of empowerment.

Therefore, the present study seeks to bridge this gap by critically examining Malaviya's principles alongside Gen Z aspirations. By integrating theoretical insights with empirical evidence, the study aims to move beyond conventional approaches and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of empowerment that is both contextually grounded and contemporarily relevant.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts a quantitative, descriptive, and analytical research design to examine the evolving perspectives on women's empowerment by comparing the normative framework of Madan Mohan Malaviya with contemporary views of Generation Z (Gen Z). The objective is to assess the extent to which modern attitudes align with or diverge from Malaviya's reformist vision. The study integrates

theoretical insights with empirical evidence, thereby enabling a structured evaluation of changing gender norms in the context of education, economic participation, and social roles.

The analysis is based primarily on primary data collected through a structured questionnaire administered to a sample of 70 respondents. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants belonging to the Gen Z cohort, typically aged between 18 and 26 years. The respondents were drawn from urban and semi-urban backgrounds, ensuring exposure to contemporary socio-economic and digital environments that influence gender perceptions. While the sample size is relatively small, it is considered adequate for exploratory quantitative analysis and identifying indicative trends.

The survey instrument was designed using Likert-scale statements ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), capturing respondents' attitudes across four key dimensions: education and empowerment, gender equality and freedom of choice, economic empowerment, and cultural norms and role perception. These dimensions were derived from Malaviya's philosophical framework as well as contemporary gender discourse, allowing for a meaningful comparative analysis. The variables included both indicators of traditional orientation, such as education for family roles and adherence to cultural norms, and indicators of modern empowerment, such as financial independence, freedom of choice, and role redefinition.

To quantify the level of empowerment, a composite empowerment index was constructed by taking the mean of selected indicators, namely education for independence, freedom of choice, financial independence, and redefinition of gender roles. This approach is aligned with capability-based perspectives, particularly the framework developed by Amartya Sen, which conceptualizes empowerment as the expansion of individual agency and substantive freedoms. The index provides a consolidated measure to assess the degree of empowerment reflected in respondents' attitudes.

The data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, including mean values and percentage distributions, to identify patterns in responses. In addition, correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between key variables, particularly those representing traditional and modern perspectives. The analysis was carried out using statistical software such as R or Stata, ensuring systematic processing and replicability of results.

The study is guided by a comparative analytical framework that compares Malaviya's welfare-oriented and socially embedded model of empowerment with the agency-driven, individual-centered perspective of Gen Z. While the former emphasizes reform within cultural and social structures, the latter reflects a shift toward autonomy, choice, and equality. The empirical findings are interpreted within this framework to highlight areas of continuity and transformation.

Results and Data Analysis

The descriptive analysis provides a baseline understanding of Gen Z's perception regarding the historical and contemporary relevance of Malaviya's framework.

Respondents strongly agreed that Malaviya's emphasis on women's education remains relevant today, recording a high mean score of 4.27 ($SD = 0.86$). The vision of women as active contributors to nation-building also saw high consensus, with a mean score of 4.16 ($SD = 0.88$). The statement suggesting Malaviya's ideas successfully balanced women's rights with Indian cultural values received the lowest level of agreement in the dataset, though still positive, with a mean of 3.77 ($SD = 1.05$). Participants agreed that Malaviya's philosophy provides useful guidance for contemporary empowerment,

yielding a mean of 3.91 ($SD = 0.94$). Reflecting the generational shift, respondents agreed that modern concepts of women's empowerment have expanded beyond Malaviya's original vision, showing a mean of 4.04 ($SD = 1.00$). and the highest consensus was found on the synthesis of ideas, with respondents strongly agreeing (mean of 4.35, $SD = 0.89$) that today's empowerment should combine Malaviya's ideals with contemporary values of equality and individual freedom.

To determine whether the agreement levels observed in the sample are statistically significant, a one-sample t-test was conducted for each statement against a neutral test value ($\mu = 3$).

Statement	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Malaviya's emphasis on women's education remains relevant in the twenty-first century.	4.27	0.86	14.77	$p < 0.001$
Malaviya's vision of women as contributors to nation-building is still applicable today.	4.16	0.88	13.18	$p < 0.001$
Malaviya's ideas successfully balanced women's rights with Indian cultural values.	3.77	1.05	7.33	$p < 0.001$
Malaviya's philosophy provides useful guidance for promoting women's empowerment in contemporary India.	3.91	0.94	9.68	$p < 0.001$
Modern concepts of women's empowerment have expanded beyond Malaviya's original vision.	4.04	1.00	10.40	$p < 0.001$
Women's empowerment today should combine Malaviya's ideals with contemporary values of equality and individual freedom.	4.35	0.89	15.17	$p < 0.001$

The inferential analysis reveals that all t-values are highly significant ($p < 0.001$). This statistically confirms that Gen Z does not hold a neutral stance on these issues; rather, they definitively agree that Malaviya's foundational principles of education and nation-building remain highly relevant. Furthermore, the statistical significance of the final statement ($t = 15.17$) empirically proves that contemporary youth strongly advocate for a hybrid model of empowerment that merges classical ethics with modern liberties.

Discussion

The empirical results bridge the gap highlighted in the literature review between traditional, value-based frameworks and the highly pragmatic, individualistic aspirations of Generation Z.

While classical empowerment theory championed by thinkers like Malaviya emphasizes moral development and cultural rootedness alongside education, modern economic paradigms often prioritize pure financial independence and labour force participation. The data suggests that Gen Z does not view these paradigms as mutually exclusive. The significant agreement (Mean = 4.35) regarding the combination of Malaviya's ideals with modern equality indicates that Gen Z seeks a synthesized approach. They desire the financial independence and global mobility afforded by the modern gig economy, but they still recognize the intrinsic value of education for holistic development and nation-building, directly mirroring Malaviya's core arguments.

Interestingly, the highest variance ($SD = 1.05$) and lowest mean (3.77) were observed when evaluating whether Malaviya's ideas successfully balanced women's rights with cultural values. This indicates a degree of modern scepticism among Gen Z regarding the constraints of traditional cultural norms, reinforcing Agarwal's (1997) and Jayachandran's (2015) assertions that cultural and social norms often act as persistent barriers to female agency. Gen Z recognizes that while the *foundation* of Malaviya's thought is sound, the *application* must be updated to dismantle patriarchal structures that traditional interpretations may have inadvertently preserved.

Conclusion

This comparative study sought to examine the intersection between Madan Mohan Malaviya's traditional principles of women's emancipation and the contemporary aspirations of Generation Z in India. Through a synthesis of conceptual literature and primary empirical data, it is evident that the pursuit of women's empowerment is a dynamic, evolving construct.

The statistical analysis demonstrates that Gen Z highly values the foundational tenets of Malaviya's philosophy, particularly his advocacy for education and the role of women in national progress. However, the data also confirms a generational evolution in thought: modern youth recognize that contemporary empowerment has expanded beyond historical visions to prioritize individual agency, economic autonomy, and structural equality.

Ultimately, this study concludes that effective frameworks for women's empowerment in India cannot rely solely on technocratic economic metrics, nor can they rest entirely on historical cultural models. Policymakers and educators must adopt a synthesized approach. By anchoring modern, capability-enhancing economic opportunities within the ethical and educational foundations proposed by historical thinkers like Malaviya, India can foster an environment of empowerment that is both culturally resonant and economically transformative for future generations.

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