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WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AS A PATHWAY TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO INDIA

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Abstract

Women's empowerment has emerged as a central concern within contemporary development discourse and is explicitly recognised in Sustainable Development Goal 5 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda. However, the relationship between women's empowerment and sustainable development extends beyond gender equality and encompasses poverty reduction, education, health, decent work, reduced inequalities, inclusive institutions and environmental sustainability. This conceptual paper examines women's empowerment as a multidimensional process and develops an integrated framework connecting empowerment with sustainable development outcomes, with particular reference to India. The paper draws upon feminist development theory, the capability approach, empowerment literature and recent empirical and policy-oriented scholarship. It conceptualises empowerment through five interconnected dimensions: social, economic, political, digital and psychological empowerment. Drawing on Kabeer's resources-agency-achievements framework and Sen's capability approach, the paper identifies agency as the central mechanism through which resources and opportunities are converted into meaningful choices and outcomes. The review of recent Indian evidence indicates progress in women's financial inclusion, household decision-making, asset ownership and labour-force participation. At the same time, persistent inequalities related to unpaid care work, gender-based violence, occupational segregation, unequal access to productive resources, digital exclusion and restrictive social norms continue to constrain substantive empowerment. The paper identifies a research gap in the fragmented treatment of these dimensions and proposes a multidimensional Women's Empowerment–Sustainable Development Framework. The framework conceptualises structural resources and enabling conditions as inputs, multidimensional empowerment as the transformative process, agency as the central mechanism, and sustainable development as the broader outcome. The paper argues that women should be understood not merely as beneficiaries of development programmes but as agents, decision-makers and co-creators of sustainable societies. The proposed framework provides a conceptual basis for future empirical research, policy design and institutional interventions directed towards gender-responsive and inclusive sustainable development.

Keywords: Women's empowerment; gender equality; sustainable development; agency; economic empowerment; political participation; digital empowerment; India; Sustainable Development Goals

1. Introduction

Sustainable development has increasingly evolved from a narrow emphasis on economic growth towards a broader understanding of human well-being, social justice, equality, institutional inclusion and environmental sustainability. The adoption of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 represented an important milestone in this transformation. The Agenda recognises that economic, social and environmental dimensions of development are interconnected and that progress towards one goal cannot be separated from progress towards others (United Nations, 2015).

Gender equality and women's empowerment occupy an important position within this framework. Sustainable Development Goal 5 explicitly calls for achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. At the same time, gender equality is integrated into the wider SDG architecture because women's access to education, employment, health, financial resources, political participation and institutional decision-making affects outcomes across multiple development goals. The contemporary UN gender framework therefore treats gender equality not as an isolated objective but as an important condition for progress across the 2030 Agenda. ([UNSD](#))

The relationship between women's empowerment and sustainable development is consequently both normative and developmental. From a rights perspective, equality, autonomy and freedom from discrimination are fundamental dimensions of human dignity. From a development perspective, restrictions on women's capabilities and opportunities limit the productive, social and institutional potential of societies. Yet, despite the growing prominence of the term, women's empowerment remains conceptually complex. In policy discourse, empowerment is sometimes represented through indicators such as employment, income generation, financial inclusion or participation in decision-making. Such indicators are useful, but none is sufficient on its own to capture the meaning of empowerment.

Kabeer's (1999) influential conceptualisation of empowerment as the process through which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability provides a particularly useful foundation. Her framework connects **resources, agency and achievements**, thereby shifting attention from the possession of resources towards the capacity to use resources to make meaningful choices.

Sen's (1999) capability approach similarly conceptualises development in terms of expanding substantive freedoms. From this perspective, resources matter because they provide opportunities, but development ultimately depends upon people's ability to convert those opportunities into valued ways of living.

These theoretical perspectives suggest that women's empowerment should not be equated simply with participation. A woman may participate in paid employment without controlling her earnings. She may have access to a bank account without exercising financial autonomy. She may occupy a

political position without possessing substantive decision-making authority. Similarly, access to digital technology does not necessarily result in digital empowerment if women lack literacy, skills, autonomy or safe access.

India provides an important context in which to examine these complexities. Recent evidence indicates substantial changes in women's economic and social participation. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey, female labour-force participation among persons aged 15 years and above increased from 23.3% in 2017–18 to 41.7% in 2023–24. ([Press Information Bureau](#))

Research based on NFHS-5 has also examined women's empowerment through multiple dimensions including household decision-making, financial autonomy, mobility, asset ownership and technology use. A 2024 study using six dimensions and eighteen variables constructed a Women Empowerment Index to examine differences among Indian states, demonstrating the considerable multidimensional and spatial variation in women's empowerment. ([DOI](#))

More recent research continues to highlight the complexity of the relationship. A 2025 multilevel analysis using India's NFHS data found substantial geographic variation in women's empowerment, while a 2025 study on SDG governance in India examined how gender inequalities interact with institutions, interests and policy ideas in subnational SDG implementation. ([DOI](#))

Against this background, the present paper addresses the following central question:

How can women's empowerment be conceptualised as a multidimensional pathway towards sustainable development, and what structural and institutional conditions are necessary for empowerment to become transformative?

The paper develops a conceptual framework that integrates social, economic, political, digital and psychological dimensions of women's empowerment and positions agency as the central mechanism connecting resources with sustainable development outcomes.

2. Objectives of the Study

The paper has the following objectives:

1. To examine the conceptual relationship between women's empowerment and sustainable development.
2. To review major theoretical perspectives on women's empowerment.
3. To examine the multidimensional nature of women's empowerment.
4. To analyse recent evidence concerning women's empowerment in India.

3. Methodology

The present study adopts a conceptual and descriptive-analytical research design based exclusively on secondary sources. The analysis synthesises theoretical literature, peer-reviewed research, international development reports, Indian government publications and recent studies concerning women's empowerment and sustainable development. The literature was examined thematically around five major dimensions of empowerment: social, economic, political, digital and psychological. Particular attention was given to literature addressing agency, capabilities, decision-making, financial inclusion, employment, political participation, gender norms and sustainable development. Recent scholarship published between 2024 and 2026 was incorporated to strengthen the contemporary relevance of the analysis. This includes studies examining women's

empowerment using NFHS-5, financial inclusion and sustainable development, geographic variation in empowerment, gender inequalities in SDG governance, and the broader relationship between women and the SDGs in India. ([ScienceDirect](#)) The study does not claim to establish statistical causality. Instead, it synthesises existing theoretical and empirical knowledge to propose a conceptual framework that can subsequently be tested through empirical research.

4. Theoretical Foundations of Women's Empowerment

4.1 Feminist Perspectives on Empowerment

The concept of empowerment has significant roots in feminist scholarship and women's movements. Feminist approaches challenged development models that treated women primarily as passive recipients of welfare. The Women in Development approach sought greater integration of women into development processes, particularly through education and economic participation. Later approaches, particularly Gender and Development, shifted attention from women's participation alone to gender relations, social structures and unequal distributions of power.

Kabeer (1994) argued that gender-sensitive development must address the structures that reproduce women's disadvantage rather than merely incorporating women into existing systems. This distinction remains important because inclusion within unequal structures does not necessarily produce empowerment. Women may enter labour markets, political institutions or educational systems while continuing to experience discrimination and unequal power relations.

4.2 Resources, Agency and Achievements

Kabeer's (1999) resources-agency-achievements framework provides one of the strongest conceptual foundations for understanding empowerment.

Resources refer to material, human, social and institutional resources that enable individuals to exercise choice. These include education, income, land, technology, credit, information, social networks and institutional opportunities.

Agency refers to the ability to define goals, make choices, negotiate, act and influence decisions.

Achievements refer to the outcomes produced through the interaction of resources and agency.

The significance of this framework lies in its rejection of the assumption that resources automatically generate empowerment. For example, access to a bank account is a resource. Whether that account contributes to empowerment depends partly on whether the woman can use it independently, save money, make transactions and exercise control over financial decisions. Similarly, employment constitutes an economic resource and potentially an achievement. Its empowerment implications depend on earnings, employment security, working conditions, control over income and bargaining power.

4.3 The Capability Approach

Sen's (1999) capability approach conceptualises development as the expansion of substantive freedoms. Capabilities represent the actual opportunities individuals possess to achieve valued ways of living. The capability approach is particularly relevant to women's empowerment because women may possess similar formal resources while having different real opportunities. For example, two women may have comparable educational qualifications but different employment opportunities because of family responsibilities, mobility restrictions, safety concerns or social

norms. Empowerment therefore requires not merely formal equality of access but substantive capabilities. The capability perspective also shifts attention towards conversion factors—the social, cultural, economic and institutional conditions that influence the extent to which resources can be transformed into actual freedoms.

5. Literature Review

5.1 Conceptualising Women's Empowerment

Mosedale (2005) emphasised that empowerment should be understood as a process rather than a fixed state. Empowerment involves changes in power relations and women's ability to make choices.

Malhotra et al. (2002) similarly demonstrated that empowerment has multiple domains, including economic, sociocultural, familial, legal, political and psychological dimensions.

Alsop et al. (2006) conceptualised empowerment in terms of people's capacity to make effective choices and transform these choices into desired outcomes.

These perspectives establish that empowerment is multidimensional and context-dependent.

More recent research continues to encounter the same conceptual challenge. Richardson (2021) identified significant diversity in how empowerment has been conceptualised and measured and called for greater theoretical coherence and attention to context.

The continued relevance of this debate is evident in recent Indian scholarship, where researchers have developed multidimensional indices using NFHS-5 indicators rather than relying on a single measure. ([DOI](#))

5.2 Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment has received considerable attention because employment, income, assets and financial inclusion can potentially increase women's bargaining power.

Duflo (2012) argued that economic development and women's empowerment may reinforce each other. Economic development can create opportunities for women, while women's empowerment can contribute to broader economic development.

Golla et al. (2011) conceptualised women's economic empowerment through access to resources and the ability to benefit from them.

However, economic participation should not automatically be equated with empowerment.

Mayoux (2001) demonstrated that microfinance may produce positive economic outcomes while simultaneously increasing women's responsibilities. The empowerment effects of financial interventions therefore depend upon control, agency and broader social conditions.

Recent Indian research provides further support for the relationship between financial inclusion and economic empowerment. A 2025 study published in *Gender in Management* examined women in northern India and found a significant association between financial inclusion and women's economic empowerment, including earnings, savings and asset accumulation. ([ScienceDirect](#))

Similarly, Ghosh et al. examined women participating in self-help groups and reported positive associations between SHG interventions, entrepreneurial characteristics and economic and sociocultural empowerment. ([Sage Journals](#))

A 2026 study further examined the relationship between women's empowerment, financial inclusion and SDG 1 in rural eastern India, indicating increasing scholarly attention to the intersection of empowerment, financial inclusion and poverty reduction. ([Wiley Online Library](#)) These studies demonstrate that economic empowerment is important but also reinforce the need to examine financial inclusion as part of a broader empowerment process.

5.3 Social Empowerment and Gender Norms

Social norms shape women's opportunities by defining acceptable behaviour, roles and responsibilities. Norms surrounding marriage, mobility, domestic work, sexuality, paid employment and leadership can influence women's capacity to exercise agency. Cornwall (2016) argued that empowerment cannot be reduced to predetermined measurable outcomes because transformative change involves changes in relationships and power. Social empowerment therefore requires changes at both individual and collective levels. Education can strengthen women's capabilities, but educational attainment alone cannot eliminate discriminatory norms. The persistence of restrictive norms explains why women with similar educational qualifications may have substantially different levels of mobility, employment or decision-making power.

5.4 Political Empowerment

Political empowerment refers to women's ability to participate in formal and informal decision-making processes. Political participation is important because public decisions concerning health, education, infrastructure, welfare and environmental management have gendered consequences. The Sustainable Development Goals explicitly recognise women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership in political, economic and public decision-making. Political empowerment, however, should not be reduced to numerical representation. Women may be formally represented but have limited autonomy or influence because of institutional practices, social expectations or informal power structures. The distinction between descriptive representation and substantive influence is therefore important. Recent global evidence continues to identify leadership and decision-making as major areas of gender inequality. The 2026 UN Gender Snapshot reports continuing global gaps in political and institutional leadership and highlights concerns regarding the weakening of institutional gender-equality mechanisms. ([UNSD](#))

5.5 Digital Empowerment

Digital technologies have created new possibilities for women's empowerment.

Access to smartphones, internet services, digital banking and online education can facilitate:

- economic participation;
- financial inclusion;
- education;
- access to information;
- entrepreneurship;
- employment;
- government services; and
- civic participation.

SDG Target 5.b explicitly identifies enabling technology, particularly information and communication technologies, as an instrument for women's empowerment. Nevertheless, access alone is insufficient. Digital empowerment also requires digital literacy, affordability, meaningful use, autonomy and safety. Digital inequalities may therefore reproduce existing social inequalities if women lack access to devices, connectivity or the skills necessary to use them effectively.

5.6 Psychological Empowerment

Psychological empowerment concerns self-efficacy, confidence, aspirations, perceived control and the capacity to see oneself as an active decision-maker. This dimension is important because empowerment is partly concerned with internal agency. However, psychological empowerment should not be interpreted as an individual responsibility detached from social conditions. Confidence cannot compensate fully for structural discrimination, violence or economic dependency. The more appropriate approach is therefore to understand psychological agency and structural transformation as mutually reinforcing.

6. Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Development

The relationship between women's empowerment and sustainable development extends across multiple SDGs.

6.1 Poverty Reduction

Economic empowerment can strengthen household economic security by increasing women's access to income, assets, savings and financial services. Recent research examining rural eastern India specifically investigates the relationship between women's empowerment, financial inclusion and SDG 1, reflecting the growing recognition of this connection. ([Wiley Online Library](#)) However, the poverty-reduction effects of empowerment depend upon women's control over economic resources rather than simple access.

6.2 Education

Education expands women's capabilities and can increase access to employment, information and institutional opportunities. Education may also strengthen women's bargaining power and influence intergenerational outcomes. However, education must be connected to employment opportunities, digital access and social freedom if its transformative potential is to be realised.

6.3 Health and Well-being

Women's decision-making power influences access to healthcare, nutrition and reproductive health. Conversely, poor health, inadequate healthcare and gender-based violence can restrict women's ability to participate in social and economic life. Empowerment and health therefore operate through a reciprocal relationship.

6.4 Decent Work

Women's economic empowerment is closely related to SDG 8. The increase in female labour-force participation in India is an important development. However, participation must be accompanied by decent wages, safe working environments, social protection and opportunities for advancement. The central issue is therefore not simply whether women work, but whether employment contributes to autonomy and sustainable livelihoods.

6.5 Reduced Inequalities

Gender inequality intersects with caste, class, religion, geography, age and disability. Consequently, policies directed at "women" as a homogeneous category may overlook significant differences. An intersectional approach is necessary to ensure that empowerment policies reach women who experience multiple and overlapping forms of disadvantage.

6.6 Inclusive Institutions

Women's participation in decision-making can strengthen institutional responsiveness. However, recent research on SDG governance in India suggests that gender inequalities are embedded in institutions, interests and policy ideas, indicating that gender-responsive governance requires more than formal commitments. ([Wiley Online Library](#))

6.7 Environmental Sustainability

Women frequently possess important knowledge concerning household water, food, energy and natural resources. Women's participation in environmental governance can therefore strengthen community resilience. Agarwal's (2010) work on gender and environmental governance demonstrates how women's presence in community resource institutions can have implications for both social inclusion and environmental management.

7. Indian Context: Progress and Continuing Challenges

India presents a complex picture of women's empowerment. On the one hand, recent data indicate substantial progress. Female labour-force participation has increased considerably over the last several years. PLFS 2023–24 reports a female LFPR of 41.7% among persons aged 15 years and above, compared with 23.3% in 2017–18. ([Press Information Bureau](#))

NFHS-5-based studies also demonstrate progress in multiple dimensions of empowerment, while showing considerable regional variation. Kumar and Mondal (2024), for example, constructed a Women Empowerment Index using six dimensions and eighteen variables and identified substantial differences across Indian states([DOI](#)). Recent multilevel analysis further indicates geographic variation within India, demonstrating that national-level averages can conceal local differences in empowerment ([DOI](#)). Economic and financial inclusion represent another important dimension. Recent research identifies associations between financial inclusion and women's economic empowerment, particularly in relation to income, savings and assets ([ScienceDirect](#)). On the other hand, important structural challenges persist.

These include:

- unequal unpaid care responsibilities;
- gender-based violence;
- occupational segregation;
- unequal access to productive resources;
- digital inequalities;
- social restrictions on mobility;
- unequal political influence; and
- persistent gender norms.

Thus, improvements in individual indicators should not be interpreted as evidence that structural gender inequality has been eliminated.

8. Research Gap

The literature demonstrates considerable research on women's empowerment, but several gaps remain.

8.1 Fragmented Conceptualisation

Economic, social, political and digital dimensions are frequently examined independently. There is a need for an integrated framework that brings these dimensions together.

8.2 Participation versus Agency

Many studies measure empowerment through participation. However, participation does not necessarily mean control or influence. The distinction between participation and agency requires greater conceptual attention.

8.3 Empowerment versus Sustainable Development

The literature increasingly links empowerment with SDGs, but many studies continue to focus on individual SDGs rather than examining the interconnected development effects of empowerment.

8.4 Digital Transformation

Digital empowerment is becoming increasingly important, yet it remains insufficiently integrated into traditional empowerment frameworks.

8.5 Psychological and Structural Dimensions

Psychological empowerment is often studied separately from structural conditions. An integrated approach is required to understand how confidence and agency interact with institutions and social norms.

8.6 Intersectionality

National averages can conceal substantial variation among women according to caste, class, religion, age, disability and geography. Recent research itself demonstrates significant geographic variation in women's empowerment across India. ([DOI](#))

8.7 Contemporary Indian Evidence

The publication of recent research in 2024–2026 demonstrates a growing literature on empowerment and sustainable development in India. A 2026 systematic review of Indian research covering 2016–2025 identified themes including intersectional marginalisation, workplace and career challenges, marriage and relationships, and women's identities, while linking the discussion to SDGs 3, 4, 5, 8 and 16. ([Springer](#))

A 2026 bibliometric and thematic analysis similarly identified increasing scholarly attention to women and the SDGs in India while highlighting thematic and regional research gaps. ([Nature](#))

The research gap is therefore not a lack of scholarship but the need for **greater conceptual integration**. The present paper addresses this gap by positioning agency at the centre of a multidimensional empowerment framework connecting resources, empowerment and sustainable development.

9. Proposed Multidimensional Conceptual Framework



Figure 1. Women's Empowerment–Sustainable Development Framework

10. Explanation of the Proposed Framework

The proposed framework moves beyond a simple linear assumption that employment automatically produces empowerment and empowerment automatically produces development. Instead, it proposes an interactive process.

Stage 1: Structural and Enabling Conditions

Women require access to education, resources, rights, technology and supportive institutions.

Stage 2: Multidimensional Empowerment

These conditions contribute to different forms of empowerment.

Stage 3: Agency

Agency represents the central mechanism through which resources are converted into meaningful choices.

Stage 4: Empowerment Outcomes

Agency produces greater autonomy, control, decision-making and influence.

Stage 5: Sustainable Development

These outcomes contribute to broader development goals.

Stage 6: Feedback

Development outcomes can create additional resources and opportunities, reinforcing empowerment. The framework therefore conceptualises the relationship as:

Resources + Enabling Conditions → Agency → Multidimensional Empowerment → Sustainable Development

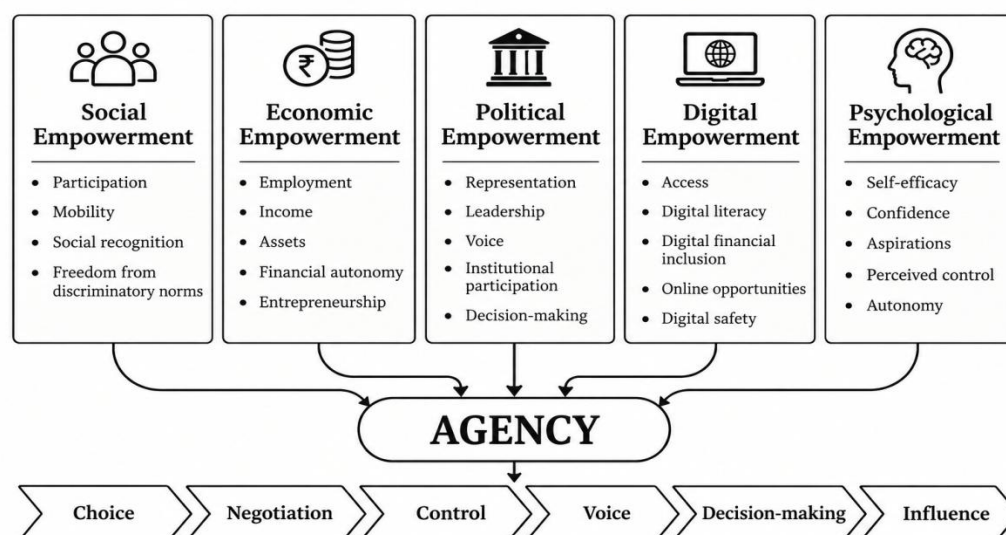


Figure 2: Five dimensions of empowerment

11. Conceptual Propositions

Based on the proposed framework, the following propositions are advanced for future empirical testing.

Proposition 1

Access to resources is a necessary but insufficient condition for women's empowerment.

The availability of education, income, assets, technology and institutional opportunities does not automatically produce empowerment unless women can exercise control over these resources.

Proposition 2

Agency mediates the relationship between resources and empowerment outcomes.

Resources are more likely to generate empowerment when women can exercise meaningful choice, negotiation and decision-making.

Proposition 3

Women's empowerment is multidimensional and the dimensions are mutually reinforcing.

Social, economic, political, digital and psychological empowerment interact rather than functioning as isolated processes.

Proposition 4

Institutional and social conditions moderate the relationship between resources and agency.

Supportive institutions and progressive social norms can facilitate the conversion of resources into agency, while restrictive structures can constrain this process.

Proposition 5

Women's empowerment contributes to sustainable development through multiple pathways.

Empowerment can contribute to poverty reduction, education, health, decent work, equality, inclusive institutions and community resilience.

Proposition 6

The relationship between women's empowerment and sustainable development is potentially reciprocal.

Sustainable development outcomes can strengthen the resources and institutional conditions that facilitate further empowerment.

12. Discussion

The conceptual framework developed in this paper contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it places **agency at the centre** of the empowerment process. This is consistent with Kabeer's (1999) conceptualisation of empowerment and Sen's (1999) capability approach. Second, it integrates multiple dimensions of empowerment that are often treated separately. Economic empowerment cannot be fully understood without considering social norms. Political participation cannot be separated from institutional structures. Digital empowerment is influenced by education and economic resources. Psychological agency is shaped by social and institutional conditions. Third, the framework connects women's empowerment to the broader SDG architecture. The relationship between empowerment and sustainable development is not limited to SDG 5. Empowerment has implications for poverty, health, education, decent work, inequalities and institutions. Recent scholarship reinforces this integrated perspective. The 2026 review of Indian research identifies relationships between women's empowerment and multiple SDGs rather than SDG 5 alone. ([Springer](#)) Similarly, recent research explicitly examines financial inclusion and women's empowerment in relation to SDG 1, demonstrating the increasing integration of gender and sustainability research. ([Wiley Online Library](#)) The framework also helps explain why development interventions can produce uneven outcomes. A woman may receive a loan but lack control over its use. She may have a bank account but remain financially dependent. She may enter paid employment but continue to carry a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work. She may be politically represented but have limited influence. She may own a smartphone but lack digital literacy. These examples demonstrate the importance of distinguishing access from agency and participation from influence.

13. Policy and Institutional Implications**13.1 From Access to Control**

Policies should measure whether women can control and use resources rather than simply whether resources are available. Financial inclusion programmes should therefore consider women's actual control over accounts, savings and expenditure.

13.2 Strengthening Decent Employment

The growth of female labour-force participation should be accompanied by attention to employment quality. Policies should address wages, social security, workplace safety, occupational mobility and work–family compatibility.

13.3 Recognising Unpaid Care Work

Women's unpaid domestic and care responsibilities remain an important constraint on economic and public participation. Investment in childcare, social infrastructure, eldercare and supportive workplace policies can reduce this constraint.

13.4 Expanding Digital Empowerment

Digital inclusion policies should address: access; affordability; digital literacy; financial literacy; online safety; and meaningful use.

13.5 Strengthening Political Agency

Women's representation should be accompanied by opportunities to exercise substantive decision-making power.

13.6 Addressing Gender-Based Violence

Safety and freedom from violence are foundational to empowerment because violence can restrict mobility, employment, education and public participation.

13.7 Adopting Intersectional Approaches

Policies should recognise differences among women based on caste, class, religion, age, disability, location and socioeconomic status.

13.8 Developing Multidimensional Monitoring

Monitoring systems should include indicators of: resources; control; agency; decision-making; mobility; employment quality; digital inclusion; political participation; safety; and psychological agency. This would provide a more substantive understanding of empowerment.

14. Implications for Management and Sociology

The proposed framework is interdisciplinary and has relevance to management, sociology, women's studies and development studies.

From a **management perspective**, women's empowerment has implications for organisational leadership, entrepreneurship, workplace participation, workforce diversity and institutional decision-making.

From a **sociological perspective**, empowerment requires examination of gender norms, family structures, social institutions, class, caste and power relations.

From a **women's studies perspective**, empowerment requires attention to patriarchy, agency, intersectionality and structural transformation.

From a **development perspective**, empowerment represents both an objective and a mechanism through which inclusive development can occur.

The integration of these perspectives makes it possible to understand empowerment as a social process rather than merely an economic outcome.

15. Future Research Directions

The framework provides several opportunities for empirical research.

First, future researchers can construct multidimensional empowerment indices combining economic, social, political, digital and psychological indicators.

Second, comparative studies can examine differences between rural and urban women.

Third, intersectional research can examine differences according to caste, class, religion, age and disability.

Fourth, longitudinal studies can examine whether financial and digital inclusion produce sustained changes in agency.

Fifth, organisational studies can investigate relationships between women's empowerment and leadership opportunities.

Sixth, research can examine the relationship between women's empowerment and climate resilience.

Seventh, future empirical research can test whether agency mediates the relationship between resources and sustainable development outcomes.

Finally, multilevel research can examine how household, community, institutional and policy environments influence individual empowerment.

16. Limitations of the Study

The present paper is conceptual and based on secondary literature. It does not generate primary empirical evidence or establish causal relationships. The proposed framework should therefore be treated as a conceptual model requiring empirical validation. Future research can operationalise the proposed dimensions and test the propositions using quantitative, qualitative or mixed-method approaches. A further limitation concerns the diversity of contexts in which empowerment is experienced. Measures appropriate in one social or cultural context may not fully capture empowerment in another. Consequently, future applications of the framework should remain sensitive to local conditions.

17. Conclusion

Women's empowerment is both an objective and a pathway of sustainable development. The literature reviewed in this paper demonstrates that empowerment cannot be adequately captured through a single indicator such as employment, income, education, financial inclusion or political representation. The multidimensional framework proposed here conceptualises empowerment through five interconnected dimensions: social, economic, political, digital and psychological empowerment. At the centre of these dimensions is agency—the capacity to make choices, negotiate, exercise control, participate in decisions and influence institutions. The Indian context demonstrates meaningful progress in several dimensions of women's empowerment. Female labour-force participation has increased substantially, while research based on NFHS-5 indicates important changes in financial access, household decision-making and other dimensions of empowerment. At the same time, persistent structural barriers remain. These include unpaid care responsibilities, gender-based violence, occupational inequality, digital exclusion, restrictive social norms and unequal access to productive resources. Consequently, development policy should move beyond the assumption that women's participation automatically constitutes empowerment.

The central conceptual argument of this paper is: Resources create opportunities; agency converts opportunities into choices; empowerment expands women's capacity to exercise those choices; and empowered participation can contribute to sustainable development. This perspective shifts women from being viewed primarily as beneficiaries of development programmes towards recognising them as agents, decision-makers and co-creators of sustainable societies. Sustainable development therefore requires not only greater participation of women but also greater control, voice, autonomy and institutional influence. The empowerment of women should consequently be

understood not as a separate component of development but as an integral process through which more equitable, inclusive and sustainable societies can be constructed.

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