



**AQUILAW**



**Give To Gain:  
From Empowerment to  
Inclusive Development**

A large, stylized, light brown opening quotation mark.

***“You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its' women.”***

**- Jawaharlal Nehru**

A large, stylized, light brown closing quotation mark.

## I

## Introduction

Every year, International Women’s Day offers an opportunity not only to celebrate progress toward gender equality, but also to reflect on the systems and policies that shape that progress. It reminds us that women’s empowerment is not a single milestone to be achieved, but a continuous social and political process one that requires institutions, opportunities, and cultural change to move forward together. This year’s theme of “Give to Gain” captures an idea that is relevant to today’s time. The principle underlying the theme is both simple and consequential. Empowerment would be achieved only when advancement in the conditions of women is accompanied by their ability to influence the direction of social change gained through equal opportunities in economic, social and political spheres of life.

The Indian Constitution reflects this vision clearly. Through its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, and Directive Principles, it affirms equality and dignity for all citizens while allowing space for affirmative measures to address historical disadvantages faced by



women. India’s commitment to gender equality is further reflected in its participation in international frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. More recently, India has also aligned itself with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, particularly, ‘Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’. These commitments recognize that women’s empowerment is closely tied to broader challenges, viz., poverty, inequality, access to education, healthcare, and protection from violence. In essence, when societies invest in women’s progress, they are not merely addressing a social concern, they are strengthening the very foundation of inclusive development.



## INDIA'S COMMITMENT TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: PROGRESS AND INITIATIVES

India has constantly endeavored to ensure equality for women and equal participation in all spheres of life by securing rights and entitlements through policy and legislative measures, effective law enforcement, implementation of schemes, and devising solution-centric strategies. India's policy framework for women's empowerment aims to address the multiple layers of inequality that have developed over centuries. It does so by extending support across key areas of social and economic life. These efforts focus on improving health and nutritional security through food and nutrition programmes, expanding access to education for girls, and strengthening women's economic independence through financial inclusion and livelihood opportunities.



At the same time, governance initiatives aim to increase women's participation in decision-making processes, while legal and institutional mechanisms seek to enhance safety and address violence against women. Together, these interventions are intended to create an enabling environment that supports women's overall development and participation in society. Initiatives aimed at improving education, maternal healthcare, and financial inclusion have contributed to measurable improvements in development indicators.

To name a few initiatives, India has taken for Women Empowerment in terms of Safety & Security are; One Stop Centres ("OSCs") / Sakhi: Integrated support for violence-affected women; Women Helpline (181): 24/7 toll-free service; She-Box: Online complaint mechanism for workplace harassment; Emergency Response Support System (112): Pan-India emergency number. <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.icsi.edu/media/webmodules/CSJ/13\\_Article\\_Rairoop\\_Singh\\_Chahal.pdf](https://www.icsi.edu/media/webmodules/CSJ/13_Article_Rairoop_Singh_Chahal.pdf)

Key education and health initiatives include, *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* - improving child sex ratio and promoting education; *Sukanya Samridhi Yojana*: savings scheme for girl child's education; *Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana*: cash transfer for pregnant/lactating women; *Mission Saksham Anganwadi & Poshan 2.0*: nutrition and health services.

For financial empowerment initiatives such as *Lakshpati Didi*: sustainable incomes for rural women; *Namo Drone Didi*: drone training for women in agriculture; *Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana*: collateral-free loans for women entrepreneurs; *Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana*: empowering women in agriculture; For legal reform and social empowerment; *Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana – Gramin*: house ownership in the name of women<sup>2</sup>. These measures collectively represent the foundational “give” that has enabled women to participate more fully in society. By addressing disparities at different stages of life, from childhood to professional participation, India’s policy architecture has sought to create conditions that support women’s development and agency.



<sup>2</sup>. <https://www.ncw.gov.in/publications/women-centric-schemes-by-different-ministries-of-government-of-india-goi/>



## Closing the Divide: Key Areas for Improvement in Women's Progress

India has made significant progress in establishing policies and institutional mechanisms aimed at supporting women's development and participation in society. Yet the existence of programmes/ schemes/initiatives alone does not guarantee equality. Structural barriers ranging from workplace infrastructure to social norms continue to limit the full realization of women's empowerment.



The next phase of progress therefore lies not just in creating new initiatives, but in strengthening and refining existing ones so that they respond to changing realities. Rapid economic transformation, technological change, and evolving family structures have introduced new dynamics into Indian society. These shifts have opened new opportunities for women, but they have also exposed persistent gaps, particularly in areas such as childcare support, workplace equality, economic autonomy, and social protection. In a society where traditional norms and gender roles remain deeply embedded, these shifts present both opportunities and new challenges for achieving meaningful and sustained progress in women's empowerment.

## IV

## HIDDEN OBSTACLES: EXPOSING THE UNDERLYING ISSUES

The following are illustrative areas where additional support and policy attention may be required.

**Reimagining Gender Roles for Economic Participation.**

One of the most significant yet often overlooked barriers to women's participation in the workforce is the lack of reliable childcare. For many women, returning to work after childbirth becomes difficult when adequate support systems are not available. Recognising this challenge, the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 requires establishments with 50 or more employees to provide crèche facilities within a prescribed distance of the workplace. The intention behind this provision is clear: to help women resume their professional lives without having to choose between employment and childcare. In practice, however, implementation has been uneven. Many workplaces have struggled to comply due to uncertainties around infrastructure standards, operational costs, and regulatory oversight. The provision also applies mainly to larger establishments in the formal sector, leaving a large number of women, especially those working in informal or small-scale employment, without access to organized childcare support. Addressing this gap will require a broader approach. Strengthening community-based childcare systems, expanding public childcare facilities, and encouraging collaborative models between employers and local governments could significantly improve women's ability to remain in the workforce after childbirth.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1594223>;  
<https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/TheMaternityBenefitAct1961.pdf>

## Recognising Menstrual Health in Workplace Policy

Another emerging area of discussion concerns the recognition of menstrual health within workplace policy frameworks. At present, India does not have a nationwide statutory framework mandating menstrual leave, although the issue has been the subject of policy debate and legislative proposals in recent years. A few state-level initiatives and corporate policies have begun experimenting with menstrual leave provisions, reflecting a growing awareness of gender-specific health considerations in workplace environments. While views differ on whether menstrual leave should be mandated by law, the broader conversation highlights the need for workplaces to acknowledge women's health needs through flexible leave structures, improved sanitation infrastructure, and greater awareness. Addressing menstrual health in this manner is not merely a matter of welfare but of ensuring that workplace policies reflect the realities of women's physical well-being.<sup>4</sup>

## Recognizing Shared Care Responsibilities Through Paternity Leave

Workplace policies addressing caregiving responsibilities have historically focused almost exclusively on maternity benefits. While maternity leave remains essential, an exclusive emphasis on maternal caregiving can inadvertently reinforce the perception that childcare responsibilities rest primarily with women. This perception has practical consequences within the labour market. One of the widely acknowledged challenges faced by female professionals is the implicit hiring bias that assumes women may take extended maternity leave or step away from the workforce due to family responsibilities. Such assumptions can influence hiring decisions, promotional trajectories, and long-term career prospects. Introducing more robust paternity leave policies could help address this imbalance.



4. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/in-karnataka-women-employees-to-get-one-day-menstrual-leave-every-month/articleshow/124420991.cms>

If caregiving responsibilities are institutionally recognized as belonging to both parents, the perceived hiring risk associated with maternity leave would no longer apply exclusively to women. In effect, paternity leave has the potential to rebalance workplace expectations around caregiving while also encouraging greater involvement of fathers in early childcare. India currently does not have a comprehensive statutory framework mandating paternity leave in the private sector, although certain government employees are entitled to limited paternity leave under service rules. Expanding such policies could help reduce structural biases while supporting a more equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities.<sup>5</sup>

### **Addressing Gendered Pricing and Economic Inequality**

Economic empowerment forms a central pillar of gender equality. While initiatives aimed at promoting entrepreneurship and financial inclusion have expanded women's participation in economic activity, hidden structural inequalities continue to affect financial autonomy. One such issue is the phenomenon often referred to as the "pink tax," where products marketed toward women particularly personal care and hygiene products are sometimes priced higher than comparable products marketed toward men.

Everyday expenses relating to health, hygiene, and personal care form a recurring financial burden that disproportionately affects women. Although India has taken steps to address certain aspects of this disparity, such as the removal of GST on sanitary napkins in 2018, broader concerns around gendered pricing practices continue to be raised globally. These pricing disparities can have cumulative economic consequences. Ensuring affordability of essential products, particularly those relating to menstrual hygiene and personal health, therefore becomes an important component of economic empowerment. Greater transparency in pricing, stronger consumer protection mechanisms, and policy interventions aimed at improving access to essential products could help address these disparities.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> <https://persmin.gov.in/sites/default/files/Estt.%20Leave%29%20Rules.pdf>; <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/why-india-needs-paternity-leave-policy>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/gst-council-scraps-tax-on-sanitary-napkins/article24521461.ece>; <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2019/03/what-is-the-pink-tax/>

## Increasing Female Labour Force Participation

Despite improvements in education and policy support, India's female labour force participation rate remains relatively low compared to global averages. Research by international institutions has consistently highlighted the economic potential of closing gender gaps in labour participation.<sup>7</sup>

Multiple factors contribute to this trend, including limited employment opportunities in certain regions, concerns relating to workplace safety, lack of flexible working arrangements, and cultural expectations regarding caregiving responsibilities. Improving safe transportation, expanding skill development programmes, encouraging flexible work structures, and strengthening workplace infrastructure could help create conditions that support greater participation by women in the workforce. Increasing



women's participation in economic activity is not only a question of gender equality but also an important driver of economic growth. Increasing workforce participation can significantly strengthen economic output and household income levels while also contributing to more stable economic growth. In the Indian context, where demographic trends place a growing emphasis on skilled labour and entrepreneurship, enabling women to participate fully in economic activity represents a critical opportunity for long-term development.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/gender/brief/women-work-and-economy-india>

## Recognising the Needs of Rural Single Women

Despite progress in gender policy, many welfare programmes continue to assume the presence of a traditional family structure in which women are supported by male household members. In practice, however, single women often encounter heightened economic and social vulnerabilities. These may include difficulties in accessing housing, credit, employment opportunities, and social protection benefits that are tied to household or marital status. Widowed and deserted women may experience financial insecurity and social marginalisation, especially in rural and economically vulnerable communities. Several initiatives have attempted to address aspects of this challenge, for instance, widow pension schemes under the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) provide financial support to economically disadvantaged widows. However, broader policy recognition of the needs of rural women including widows, separated, divorced, unmarried, and deserted women remain limited. Strengthening social protection systems, ensuring independent access to housing and financial services, and expanding livelihood opportunities specifically designed for them would play an important role in improving economic security and social inclusion for this group.<sup>8</sup>



<sup>8</sup>. <https://nsap.dord.gov.in/circular.do?method=aboutus>

## V

## REAPING THE GAINS: HOW IT BOOSTS GROWTH

It is important to note that without women's participation, India's aspiration of becoming a global economic power cannot be realised. As Jawaharlal Nehru famously observed, "To awaken the people, it is the women who must be awakened. Once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves." This reflects a widely held understanding that women's empowerment can trigger transformative changes across society. Achieving genuine equality requires addressing persistent barriers through holistic policies, quality education, accessible healthcare, and robust infrastructure, enabling women to become equal architects of India's future.

Investments in women's empowerment also generate important intergenerational benefits. When women have access to education, healthcare, and financial resources, families experience improvements in health outcomes, nutrition, and educational attainment. Empowered women are better positioned to invest in healthcare, education, and long-term household stability, contributing to broader social development outcomes. While many of the measures discussed above are framed as policies intended to support women, their impact extends far beyond individual empowerment. When barriers to women's participation are reduced, the gains are felt across families, institutions, and the economy. Policies that expand opportunities for women strengthen social structures, improve economic outcomes, and contribute to more inclusive and resilient institutions.

India's policy framework has already taken important steps in building the foundations for women's empowerment. At the same time, addressing the remaining gaps, such as childcare infrastructure, workplace equality, and societal perceptions of women in leadership, will be essential to ensure sustained progress. The central idea behind the theme "Give to Gain" is clear: when women are given opportunities, support, and recognition, society as a whole stands to gain.



# AQUILAW



*This series has been prepared by Anju Thomas, Himanshu Chakravarty, and Riddhi Jain who can be reached at [anju.thoms@aquilaw.com](mailto:anju.thoms@aquilaw.com), [himanshu.chakravarty@aquilaw.com](mailto:himanshu.chakravarty@aquilaw.com), and [riddhi.jain@aquilaw.com](mailto:riddhi.jain@aquilaw.com), respectively. This series is only for informational purposes and is not intended for solicitation of any work. Nothing in this series constitutes legal advice and should not be acted upon in any circumstance.*



KOLKATA



MUMBAI



DELHI



BHUBANESWAR

[www.aquilaw.com](http://www.aquilaw.com)