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Women's Empowerment at the Crossroads of Social Structure and Economy: Looking beyond Economic Embeddedness

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the multifaceted nature of gender inequality by tracing its historical evolution and exploring its persistence within contemporary social and economic structures. It argues that women's empowerment cannot be fully understood or achieved through economic participation alone, as the deeper roots of gender disparity lie in the socio-structural foundations of society. While economic inclusion provides new opportunities, it often operates within a framework that continues to reinforce patriarchal hierarchies and systemic violence against women. By situating empowerment at the intersection of economy, culture, and social structure, the paper calls for a more comprehensive and transformative understanding of gender justice. Beginning with a historical overview, the study revisits women's struggles for equality across different civilizations and socio-economic orders—from early agrarian societies to modern industrial and post-industrial contexts. Despite major progress in education, labour participation, and legal recognition, women remain constrained by cultural expectations, institutional biases, and unequal power relations. The paper highlights how capitalist economic systems have commodified women's labour while undervaluing their social and reproductive contributions, thereby reproducing inequality in new forms. It contends that such an economic focus risks obscuring the social, political, and emotional dimensions of empowerment that are equally critical for women's autonomy and dignity.

Through an intersectional lens, the paper explores how class, caste, religion, and ethnicity intersect to shape women's experiences of inequality. In many contexts, especially within developing societies, empowerment remains contingent upon existing social networks and community norms, which often regulate women's access to resources and participation in decision-making. Thus, empowerment cannot be reduced to economic gain or material independence but must include freedom from violence, control over one's body, and the ability to exercise agency within restrictive social systems.

Keywords

Devaluation hypothesis,
Gender discrimination,
Gender stereotypes,
Glass ceiling,
SDG 5

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Introduction

Humans occupy a unique position as both biological organisms and members of socially constructed communities. While natural differences—such as gender, physique, and skin color—are products of biological diversity and should be acknowledged with respect, they are often distorted within the social realm. Once filtered through societal lenses, these differences become bases for discrimination, marginalization, and hierarchical divisions. Gender inequality exemplifies this phenomenon, where biological differences are reshaped through stereotypes and cultural biases, deeply embedded through socialization.

This paper seeks to examine gender inequality through a historical and spatial lens, identifying the contestations and negotiations that have shaped the status of women over time. It explores how factors such as caste, culture, race, and gender stereotypes intersect to reinforce systemic inequality. Although Sustainable Development Goal 5, introduced by the United Nations in 2015, advocates for gender equality, progress remains uneven and incomplete. Women, especially in patriarchal societies, continue to be denied basic rights and dignity that should be guaranteed by virtue of being human. The paper calls for a paradigm shift from economic embeddedness toward social transformation. Empowerment must be envisioned as a holistic and moral project grounded in justice, equality, and collective well-being. The conclusion emphasizes that genuine empowerment demands dismantling entrenched social hierarchies, redefining institutional norms, and fostering inclusive

development that values women not merely as economic agents but as full social participants. By moving beyond the narrow confines of economic interpretation, the paper contributes to a broader sociological understanding of empowerment as a transformative process essential for achieving sustainable and equitable development.

Methodology and Objectives

This research is grounded in a comprehensive analysis of existing literature and employs a qualitative, secondary data collection method. By adopting a case study approach, the paper explores the various contestations and negotiations that women experience across different societal contexts, each characterized by distinct social structures and levels of economic development. The objective is to position the findings at the intersection of socio-cultural frameworks and economic paradigms, revealing how both dimensions jointly influence the persistence of gender inequality.

Women's Plea for Recognition: A Historical Account of Contestation and Negotiation

The demand for recognition, dignity, and equal rights has remained central to women's struggles throughout history. These struggles, occurring across different time periods and geographic regions, reflect deep-seated systemic barriers. By examining diverse case studies, this paper underscores the persistent negotiation that women have engaged in to assert their fundamental human rights. This section further explores how the social and economic landscapes within which women exist shape their experiences of subjugation and resistance.

Women's Subjugation: Evolutionary Justification and Its Enduring Legacy

It is well established that the dominant paradigms of any era deeply influence contemporary theories and social beliefs. A clear example of this can be found in the influence of evolutionary theory during the mid to late 19th century—a period that also witnessed the emergence of major social science disciplines. Charles Darwin's seminal work, *On the Origin of Species* (1859), introduced the concept of natural selection. Later, he elaborated on sexual selection as another evolutionary mechanism.

Scholars like Jerry Bergman (1994) have pointed out that Darwin extended his theories to argue that women were biologically inferior to men, drawing analogies from the animal kingdom. For instance, Darwin compared bulls and cows to support his claim of male superiority, asserting that females across species were generally less evolved. He even suggested that certain traits in women resembled those of so-called "lower races," reflecting a past and more primitive stage of human development.

Such views, while scientifically contested today, were widely accepted at the time and served to justify gender hierarchies. The popularity of Darwin's theories during this formative era—marked by industrialization and the institutionalization of social sciences—contributed to the theoretical legitimization of gender stereotypes and the subjugation of women. While many later scholars, including feminist thinkers, have strongly criticized Darwin's gendered assumptions, it remains important to understand how prevailing scientific

ideologies historically reinforced patriarchal structures.

Looking Critically: A Re-evaluation of the Hunting-Gathering Society

Hunting-gathering societies are often regarded as the earliest stage of human civilization. A commonly held belief about such societies is that labor was clearly divided along gender lines—men engaged in hunting due to their physical strength, while women participated in gathering and domestic responsibilities, including child-rearing. This narrative has historically been invoked to justify contemporary gender biases, with the notion that women have always been relegated to the domestic sphere. As a result, even today, women often struggle for recognition in public or outdoor labor and continue to advocate for domestic work to be acknowledged as legitimate labor.

However, recent scholarship challenges this long-standing assumption. Anderson et al. (2023) provide compelling evidence that in nearly 79% of historically documented foraging societies, women actively participated in hunting and demonstrated proficiency with hunting tools. This finding is critical in reinterpreting the civic and theoretical understanding of gendered divisions of labor, highlighting that the exclusion of women from productive labor spaces is more socially constructed than naturally determined.

Agricultural Society: The Dual Burden and the Persistent Invisibility of Women's Labor

Rural societies, particularly villages, are typically identified with agricultural modes of production, where farming and livestock

serve as primary means of survival. While literature often romanticizes village life, the lived reality of women within these settings is far from idealized. Women in agricultural societies face a heavy dual burden: they contribute significantly to both farming and domestic responsibilities, yet their labor remains systematically undervalued and undercompensated. Often, they endure exploitative household dynamics, including economic dependence and domestic abuse. Kapadia (1996) notes that in many such contexts, women's hard work is met not with appreciation but with violence and the appropriation of their earnings by male family members, who may squander resources on alcohol and other substances.

Case of Haryanvi Women: Multitasking Without Recognition

Prem Chowdhry (2011), in her seminal work *Political Economy of Production and Reproduction: Caste, Custom, and Community in North India*, presents a critical examination of women's roles in agrarian economies, particularly in Haryana. She reveals that despite high levels of female participation in agricultural labor, their contributions are devalued and rendered invisible within both economic and cultural narratives. Women engage extensively in primary agricultural work such as field preparation, seed sowing, irrigation, weeding, harvesting, threshing, and transplanting. With the exception of ploughing, women are responsible for nearly all farm-related tasks. In addition, they undertake domestic responsibilities—cooking, childcare, and providing meals to male workers—highlighting their multiple roles.

Chowdhry further discusses how the Green Revolution, which introduced large-scale, high-yield farming, intensified the labor burden on local women without proportionate recognition or reward. She also examines the cultural ideals embedded in local folklore, which valorize women who assist their husbands in both agricultural and domestic spheres, thereby normalizing their dual burden. A crucial dimension of Chowdhry's (2011) analysis is the interplay of gender, caste, and class. She notes that women from upper-caste groups such as Kshatriyas and Banias were often restricted to domestic work, while women from agrarian castes like Jats and Gujjars were expected to manage both agricultural and household tasks. Despite the stark contrast in workload, neither group is recognized as economically productive, with women's labor being viewed as part of their "natural" duties. Additionally, Chowdhry draws attention to women's role in livestock management. Women are deeply involved in the care of animals and in producing value-added goods like ghee, paneer, and sweets. Yet, it is typically men who sell these products in the market and control the earnings, thus reaping the benefits of women's unacknowledged labor.

The Plight of Pallar Women: Dual Burden, Violence, and Unequal Pay

Karin Kapadia's (1996, 1998) research sheds light on the overlooked contributions of landless, lower-caste women in South India, specifically the Pallar women. Her ethnographic work emphasizes that these women not only actively participate in agricultural labor but also often earn more than their husbands, making them the primary breadwinners in many households.

Despite their essential economic role, their labor remains invisible in policy discourse and social recognition. Kapadia (1998) illustrates the dual burden Pallar women carry—as both wage earners and homemakers—juggling agricultural labor with domestic responsibilities like cooking, cleaning, and caregiving. She further highlights the preference for female children within these communities, as daughters are expected to manage domestic tasks while their mothers work outside the home. Drawing on a metaphorical analogy, she notes the biological and social comparison of farming to gender roles: just as men provide the seed in reproduction and women nourish it, in agriculture men may plough the fields, but women manage all other farming operations.

The study also documents the normalization of domestic violence within Pallar households, justified through cultural narratives. Moreover, when Pallar women engage in informal labor, they are paid significantly less than men, compounding the discrimination they face based on gender, caste, and class.

Beyond Agriculture and Household: Adivasi Women in Bengal's Mines and Plantations

To broaden the scope beyond agriculture and domestic labor, the experiences of Adivasi women in early 20th-century Bengal provide a sobering account of exploitation in industrial settings. Dagmar Engels (1993) examines the lives of Adivasi women employed in coal mines and tea plantations, revealing their harsh working conditions and systemic marginalization. These women migrated, both individually and with families, in search of livelihood opportunities, only to

face life-threatening labor conditions and domestic responsibilities, often simultaneously. Engels (1993) details how some women were compelled into prostitution due to economic desperation, and others were forced to undergo abortions as pregnancy rendered them "unfit" for labor. The criteria for employment were often based on physical health, further excluding vulnerable women. Adivasi women were considered ideal laborers for their resilience in tough climatic conditions, their inability to negotiate wages, and their willingness to bring children—potential laborers themselves—into the workforce.

The exploitation of these women underscores a persistent pattern of gendered and racialized labor valuation, wherein Adivasi women's work remained undervalued, underpaid, and perilously unprotected. Engels (1993, pp. 228–231) also explains how hiring practices prioritized profit over people, selecting only those from whom maximum labor could be extracted.

Women in Industrial and Post-Industrial Societies: Struggles for Dignity and Equity

The onset of industrialization in the 19th century marked a turning point in labor systems and gender dynamics. While it generated economic opportunities, it also entrenched new forms of structural violence against women. Linda L. Lindsey (2011) offers an in-depth exploration of women's changing roles during this period in *Gender Roles: A Sociological Perspective*. She traces how women, long relegated to the domestic sphere, began entering the labor force, particularly in agricultural economies. In such households, women worked alongside men, and caregiving was assigned to older

children. Conversely, in non-farming households, women were largely confined to domestic work.

Lindsey (2011) emphasizes the shifting narratives during the industrial revolution, especially under the influence of Victorian ideals. Women were portrayed as emotionally fragile and morally superior beings, suited only for domestic duties. According to this ideology, women who worked outside the home were viewed as unfeminine or immoral (p. 317). Literacy and education did little to bridge the gender wage gap: literate women still earned less than their male counterparts, while illiterate women were often left unpaid. Unemployment and economic dependence on men contributed to rising domestic tensions and instances of gender-based violence, effectively denying women autonomy and dignity. Lindsey also critiques how professions dominated by women—such as clerical work and teaching—were perceived as low-skilled and low-prestige, reinforcing patriarchal valuations of labor (pp. 317–323). Further, Lindsey discusses the concept of triple jeopardy—wherein race, gender, and class intersect to deepen inequality. For example, white women in the U.S. generally earned more than African American women, reflecting racialized economic disparities (p. 339). She also highlights the phenomenon of the glass ceiling, where women are prevented from advancing in professional hierarchies due to gender stereotypes, lack of mentorship, and conflicting role expectations (p. 343). Through the lens of American women's experiences, Lindsey offers a broader understanding of the complex and contested position of women in both industrial and post-industrial contexts.

Looking Beyond Economic Embeddedness: A Plea for Structural Change

The previous sections have demonstrated that gender inequality persists across diverse societal contexts—whether in rural villages, agrarian setups, tribal communities, or industrialized settings. Despite some progress, women continue to be marginalized, subjected to unequal treatment, and denied equitable opportunities. While there is a common belief that economic development automatically leads to women's empowerment, this assumption fails to address the deeper structural constraints embedded in society. Mere access to economic opportunities is not sufficient; the broader social framework must be transformed to achieve genuine gender equality. Structural challenges—rooted in patriarchal norms, cultural traditions, and institutional biases—often render economic opportunities inaccessible or unsustainable for women. A holistic approach, therefore, is essential. Economic empowerment must be complemented by systemic reforms that address the intersectional barriers women face in various spheres of life. The following discussion elaborates on this argument by engaging with the notion of economic embeddedness and gender wage discrimination.

The Gender Wage Gap and Structural Discrimination

Trond Petersen and Laurie A. Morgan (2014), in their analysis within *Social Stratification: Class, Race and Gender in Sociological Perspective*, identify three key forms of discrimination that perpetuate wage inequality: Allocative discrimination, which refers to unequal access to occupations and

organizations during the hiring process; Valuative discrimination, wherein jobs predominantly held by women are systematically undervalued regardless of skill or responsibility; and Within-job wage discrimination, where men and women in the same roles are paid differently (p. 912).

Francine Blau, alongside Lawrence Kahn, presents statistical evidence illustrating persistent wage disparities between men and women (Blau & Kahn, 2011, p. 929). Their research highlights how, even with similar qualifications and roles, women consistently earn less than men. Paul England (2014) offers concrete examples from the U.S., such as nurses in Denver and skilled female workers in San Jose, California, who are paid less than men employed in less skilled occupations. She attributes this to valuative discrimination, rooted in the broader devaluation thesis—a theory suggesting that gender bias leads to systematically lower pay and recognition for work performed by women (p. 921). These studies collectively reveal that even when economic opportunities are available to women, they remain subject to layered discrimination and inequality.

Key Findings

From the examples discussed across temporal and spatial contexts, several recurring factors emerge that underpin the systemic challenges faced by women:

1. Internalization of Patriarchal Norms

One major factor is the cultural internalization of patriarchal norms, wherein domestic labor is not recognized as "real work." Women are socialized to believe that their primary role is in the home, and even when they question this

notion, they often feel morally conflicted. Tony Tam (2011) discusses the cultural devaluation hypothesis, emphasizing how women's work is consistently viewed as low-skilled and less labor-intensive, thus unworthy of recognition or reward (p. 924).

2. Normalization of the Dual Burden

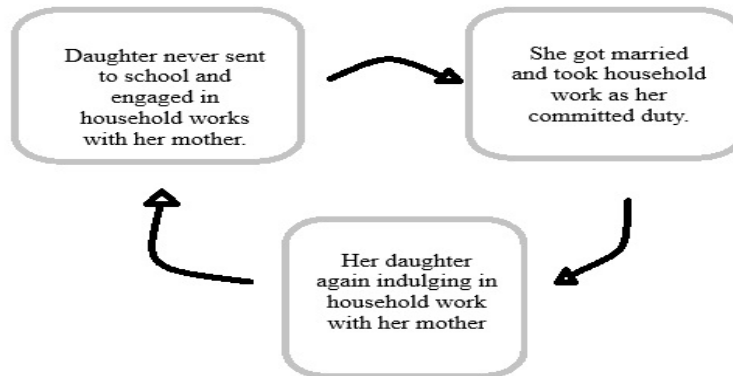
As highlighted in multiple case studies, women's dual burden—managing both productive and reproductive roles—has become so normalized that it often goes unnoticed and unappreciated. Domestic work continues to be invisible, while women's external labor is devalued. Bindu S. (2023) critiques global labor indicators like those used by the International Labour Organization (ILO), pointing out that they fail to account for the full extent of women's contributions, especially in unpaid and informal sectors.

3. Intersectionality: Caste, Class, Race, and Gender

Women's experiences are not homogenous but shaped by the intersection of caste, class, race, and gender. These axes of identity work together to produce compounded forms of marginalization. As seen in the lives of Pallar and Adivasi women, this intersectional oppression limits access to education, decent work, and dignity.

4. The Vicious Cycle of Disempowerment

Finally, a vicious cycle perpetuates women's marginal status: lack of education leads to limited job opportunities, which then confines them to domestic roles. This confinement becomes self-reinforcing, as women remain unaware that these roles are not biologically determined or socially inevitable.



Conclusion

Gender stereotypes and systemic biases continue to hinder India's progress toward achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5—gender equality. These forms of discrimination, often justified on the basis of perceived natural differences, undermine human potential and challenge the foundational principles of equality and justice. As this paper has explored, across time and space—from hunter-gatherer communities to modern industrial societies, and from domestic labor to wage employment—women have persistently struggled for recognition and fair valuation of their contributions.

Despite their continuous negotiations and contestations, the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures remain a formidable barrier. The analysis highlights that economic advancement alone does not shield women from discrimination; instead, the nature and form of inequality simply shift. Whether in agriculture, industry, or the service sector, the fundamental challenges faced by women remain disturbingly consistent. This paper calls for a critical rethinking of the structural factors that sustain gender inequality. It argues that true empowerment requires more

than economic inclusion—it demands transformative changes in societal attitudes, institutional norms, and cultural values. As Audre Lorde aptly reminds us, “It’s not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences” (The Indian Express, June 29, 2023).

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