



INDIAN JOURNAL OF
LEGAL REVIEW

VOLUME 5 AND ISSUE 3 OF 2025

INSTITUTE OF LEGAL EDUCATION



INDIAN JOURNAL OF LEGAL REVIEW

APIS – 3920 – 0001 | ISSN – 2583-2344

(Open Access Journal)

Journal's Home Page – <https://ijlr.iledu.in/>

Journal's Editorial Page – <https://ijlr.iledu.in/editorial-board/>

Volume 5 and Issue 3 of 2025 (Access Full Issue on – <https://ijlr.iledu.in/volume-5-and-issue-3-of-2025/>)

Publisher

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THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA POST-INDEPENDENCE

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BEST CITATION – URVASHI NAVIN LIMBACHIYA, THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA POST-INDEPENDENCE, *INDIAN JOURNAL OF LEGAL REVIEW (IJLR)*, 5 (3) OF 2025, PG. 12-15, APIS – 3920 – 0001 & ISSN – 2583-2344.

This article is published in the collaborated special issue of M.K.E.S. College of Law and the Institute of Legal Education (ILE), titled “Women’s Rights and Legal Reforms” (ISBN: 978-81-968842-4-6).

Abstract

India’s post-independence era marked a significant shift in the status and roles of women in society. Post-independence, the transformation of women’s status has been a multifaceted process, influenced by changes in laws, economic opportunities, education, and cultural shifts. One of the most notable changes post-independence was the adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1950, which guaranteed fundamental rights to all citizens, regardless of gender. Access to education for women improved significantly in post-independence India. The government played a key role by establishing numerous schools, universities, and vocational programs aimed at increasing female literacy and providing women with better opportunities for career advancement. The rise of women in the workforce has been a key aspect of post-independence societal change. Traditionally, women were primarily engaged in agriculture, but with the introduction of new economic policies, women found increasing opportunities in urban industries and services. Women’s participation in politics has been a significant milestone in post-independence India. Despite the legal and social strides, women in India still face significant challenges in achieving full equality.

Keywords: Status of women, legal and constitutional reforms, educational reforms, political empowerment of women, National Policy on the Empowerment of Women, 2001

Introduction

India’s post-independence era marked a significant shift in the status and roles of women in society. Before independence, Indian women were largely confined to domestic spheres, with limited access to education, employment, and political participation. However, the liberation movement itself had included prominent female figures such as Sarojini Naidu and Kasturba Gandhi, who highlighted the central role of women in the fight for India’s freedom. Post-independence, the transformation of women’s status has been a multifaceted process, influenced by changes in laws,

economic opportunities, education, and cultural shifts.

This transformation is often examined through two main lenses: the extent to which women can control their own living conditions and the degree of decision-making authority they possess, as well as how freely they can perform their tasks and activities. Women constitute half of India’s population and have made significant contributions to the development of human resources. Therefore, it is vital to encourage women to participate in decision-making processes, acquire educational opportunities, engage in employment, and sustain livelihoods in an enhanced manner. The National Policy on

the Empowerment of Women, 2001, is regarded as an essential strategy for development and has led to substantial changes in the socio-economic environment, further transforming the status of women.

Legal and Constitutional Reforms

One of the most notable changes post-independence was the adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1950, which guaranteed fundamental rights to all citizens, regardless of gender.

Several key provisions laid the foundation for legal equality between men and women, including:

Article 14: Equality before the law.

Article 15: Prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of sex.

Article 16: Equality of opportunity in matters of public employment.

Article 42: The state's responsibility to provide maternity benefits for female employees.

Additionally, **Article 243D(3)** introduced one-third reservation for women in Panchayats, with separate seats for women from Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), ensuring better representation in local governance. These provisions marked a significant step toward gender equality and empowerment.

In addition to these constitutional provisions, several laws were enacted to improve the status of women:

The Hindu Code Bill (1955-56) This series of laws reformed inheritance and marriage rights for Hindu women, granting them more rights within the family structure.

The Dowry Prohibition Act (1961) This law aimed to curb the prevalent practice of dowry, which often led to violence against women.

The Maternity Benefit Act (1961) This provided for maternity leave and job security for working women during pregnancy.

The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005 Protection of Women from DVA, 2005 is one of the key Acts and laws for women in India meant for protecting women who are oppressed by domestic violence.

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013 It deals with sexual harassment of women at the work place. It provides a legal basis that will help curb any such harassments and protects women, hence creating a safe and fair working atmosphere free from sexual harassment of women and their abuse.

The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 This act also seeks to prevent forced marriages that involve minors, so as to safeguard their rights. It aims to guarantee that girls are allowed to mature, educate themselves and be able to make wise choice concerning their lives and marriages which in turn secures their health and wellbeing.

Educational Reforms

Access to education for women improved significantly in post-independence India. The government played a key role by establishing numerous schools, universities, and vocational programs aimed at increasing female literacy and providing women with better opportunities for career advancement.

By the 1980s and 1990s, girls' enrolment in schools surged, leading to a significant rise in women pursuing higher education.

In the past, women were often denied access to basic education, with early marriages being a common practice that curtailed their opportunities for personal and intellectual growth. Education was not considered a priority for women, and societal norms confined them to restrictive roles.

However, in modern times, women have developed remarkable intellectual capacities, excelling in fields such as science, law, medicine, and engineering—areas that were once dominated by men. Today, women have

demonstrated not only their ability to match their male counterparts but often surpass them, emerging as influential leaders and pioneers in society.

The increasing participation of women in these fields in recent decades highlights the positive impact of educational reforms and the expanding opportunities for women in higher education.

Women in the Workforce

The rise of women in the workforce has been a key aspect of post-independence societal change. Traditionally, women were primarily engaged in agriculture, but with the introduction of new economic policies, women found increasing opportunities in urban industries and services. This shift allowed women to gain valuable skills, earn competitive salaries, and actively contribute to the expansion of the economy. As women entered fields such as technology, they not only adapted to these sectors but excelled, often surpassing expectations and making significant advancements. Over time, their abilities have expanded, reflecting their growing potential, and they have played a vital role in the transformation of various industries.

The liberalization of India's economy in the 1990s further boosted women's participation in sectors like information technology, media, education, and healthcare. However, challenges remain. Women continue to face lower wages than men, and cultural and societal norms often prioritize women's domestic roles over their professional ambitions. Additionally, the "glass ceiling" effect remains prevalent in higher management positions, limiting women's advancement in many fields.

Political Empowerment

Women's participation in politics has been a significant milestone in post-independence India. The early years saw women like Indira Gandhi, who became the Prime Minister of India in 1966, breaking gender barriers in leadership.

The formation of various women's organizations and the implementation of reservation policies in local governance have also contributed to an increase in the number of women in political offices.

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1992 mandated one-third of seats in Panchayats (local self-governments) to be reserved for women, ensuring better representation in rural governance.

Despite these advances, political empowerment remains a challenge for women in India. Female politicians still face significant gender-based discrimination, and the political environment remains male-dominated.

Cultural attitudes toward women have also evolved, although change has been slow. Women today have more agency in matters of marriage, education, and employment than in the past. The rise of feminism and women's rights movements has led to a growing demand for gender equality in all areas of life, from equal pay to reproductive rights.

However, deep-rooted patriarchy, especially in rural areas, continues to hinder women's progress. Traditional norms often dictate a woman's place within the home, and societal expectations regarding marriage, childbirth, and family roles remain strong.

Additionally, incidents of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, and trafficking, remain a serious issue.

Challenges and Areas for Improvement

Despite the legal and social strides, women in India still face significant challenges in achieving full equality. Some key areas for improvement include:

Gender-based Violence: Violence against women, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, and trafficking, remains prevalent. Legal measures like the *Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005)* and the *Criminal Law (Amendment) Act (2013)* have

been implemented, but enforcement is often weak.

Gender Pay Gap: Women continue to earn less than men, even in the same roles and industries.

Underrepresentation in Leadership: Women remain underrepresented in top leadership positions across various sectors.

Access to Healthcare: Though access has improved, challenges persist in rural and marginalized communities, particularly in maternal health.

Conclusion

The status of women in India has undergone significant improvements since independence, particularly in the areas of legal rights, education, and political participation. However, gender inequality continues to manifest in various forms, and the pursuit of true gender parity remains an ongoing challenge.

While progress has been made in advancing women's rights and opportunities, it is essential that these strides be accompanied by sustained efforts to challenge and transform patriarchal attitudes and practices. The future development of India depends on ensuring that women can contribute fully to all sectors of society, free from gender-based discrimination and violence.

Women must be granted equal opportunities in every aspect of society, with their rights to property and personal choice fully recognized and respected. These societal norms need to evolve to reflect this fundamental change. Women, who have contributed immensely to the nation's development—especially during the independence struggle—must be recognized not only for their past contributions but also for their ongoing role in shaping India's future. The empowerment of women is essential for the nation's progress, and their rights to equal opportunities, property, and personal choice must be respected across all spheres of life. As India moves forward, ensuring that women have the freedom and support to thrive in every

aspect of society is critical for the country's growth and prosperity.