

Education as a Catalyst for Women's Empowerment: An Empirical Perspective from India

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ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment has become a crucial component of inclusive and sustainable development, particularly in emerging economies such as India. Among the various factors influencing empowerment, education is widely recognized as a key driver of social, economic, and personal transformation. The present study investigates the relationship between education and women's empowerment by examining the direct, mediating, and moderating mechanisms underlying this association. Drawing upon the Capability Approach and Human Capital Theory, the study develops an empirical framework linking education, awareness, economic participation, decision-making power, and women's empowerment. Using a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach, the findings reveal that education positively influences women's awareness and directly contributes to empowerment. Increased awareness further enhances economic participation, which strengthens decision-making power and subsequently promotes higher levels of empowerment. The study also confirms the mediating roles of awareness, economic participation, and decision-making power in explaining the education-empowerment relationship. Furthermore, socio-cultural factors are found to negatively moderate the impact of education on women's empowerment, indicating that traditional norms and social constraints may limit the benefits of educational advancement. The empirical results indicate that the need for policies that not only expand access to quality education but also strengthen digital literacy, economic opportunities, and supportive socio-cultural environments to achieve sustainable empowerment outcomes for women.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Education, SEM, Human Capital, Capability Approach.

Introduction

Women constitute nearly half of the global population; however, their access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making platforms remains disproportionately limited. In developing economies such as India, gender inequality continues to persist despite significant policy interventions and socio-economic progress. Among the various instruments of empowerment, education has consistently been recognized as the most effective means of enhancing women's capabilities and expanding their life choices. Education not only facilitates skill development and employment opportunities but also contributes to the formation of critical awareness regarding rights, health, and social participation. Educated women are more likely to participate in economic activities, make informed decisions within households, and contribute to community development. Moreover, education plays a pivotal role in breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty and discrimination. Despite notable improvements in female literacy rates over the past decades, disparities remain significant, particularly in rural and economically weaker sections. Structural barriers such as early marriage, socio-cultural

norms, and limited access to quality education continue to restrict women's educational attainment. In this context, the present study attempts to critically examine the role of education in facilitating women's empowerment in India and highlights the need for targeted interventions to bridge existing gaps.

Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

Women's empowerment has received considerable attention from researchers, policymakers, and international organizations due to its significant contribution to social and economic development. Education is widely recognized as one of the most effective instruments for enhancing women's capabilities, economic participation, and decision-making power. Numerous studies have established that educational attainment improves women's access to resources, employment opportunities, financial independence, and social recognition.

The relationship between education and empowerment can be explained through the Capability Approach proposed by Sen (1999). According to this perspective, development should focus on expanding individuals' freedoms and opportunities rather than merely increasing income. Education enhances women's capabilities by providing knowledge, awareness, and skills that enable them to make informed choices and exercise greater control over their lives. Educated women are more likely to participate in household decision-making, access healthcare services, and engage in community development activities. Supporting this perspective, Duflo (2012) argued that education contributes significantly to women's economic and social empowerment by increasing labor force participation and strengthening bargaining power within households. Recent global evidence has further reinforced the role of education in promoting gender equality and social inclusion. According to UN Women (2023), higher levels of educational attainment are associated with improved labour market participation, increased financial inclusion, and greater representation of women in decision-making processes. Similarly, UNESCO (2024) emphasized that education contributes not only to economic advancement but also to enhanced health outcomes, reduced gender disparities, and stronger civic participation. The World Economic Forum (2024) also reported that countries with higher female educational attainment tend to exhibit narrower gender gaps and improved socio-economic outcomes. These findings collectively indicate that education serves as a critical driver of inclusive and sustainable development. Similarly, Singh and Das (2024) found that educational attainment improves women's employability and entrepreneurial potential, thereby enhancing their economic independence. These findings suggest that education acts as a catalyst for empowerment by increasing both opportunities and agency.

The Human Capital Theory developed by Becker (1964) provides an additional explanation for the empowerment benefits of education. The theory views education as an investment that enhances individual productivity, skills, and earning potential. Educated women are more likely to obtain better employment opportunities, generate higher incomes, and contribute to household financial decisions. As women become financially independent, their influence within households and communities tends to increase. Recent studies have further highlighted the role of education in improving women's awareness of legal rights, financial services, and social entitlements. Anderson (2024) reported that educated women exhibit higher levels of autonomy and participation in community affairs compared to their less educated counterparts. Similarly, Kona Prabha and Sucharitha (2024) concluded that education positively influences women's self-confidence, mobility, and social participation, thereby contributing to overall empowerment.

Despite improvements in educational access, socio-cultural barriers continue to influence women's empowerment outcomes. Traditional gender roles, unequal distribution of household responsibilities, and patriarchal norms often restrict women's ability to fully utilize educational opportunities. UNDP (2024) highlighted that supportive institutional structures and favourable social environments are essential for translating educational achievements into meaningful empowerment. Likewise, Sharma and Gupta (2023) observed that the impact of education on empowerment varies considerably across socio-economic and cultural contexts, indicating the importance of contextual factors in shaping women's development trajectories. Despite these positive outcomes, several barriers continue to limit the transformative impact of education. Socio-cultural norms, patriarchal attitudes, gender discrimination, and economic constraints often restrict educational opportunities and empowerment outcomes, particularly in developing countries. Therefore, empowerment should be viewed as a multidimensional process influenced by both educational attainment and the broader socio-cultural environment.

Based on the Capability Approach and Human Capital Theory, this study proposes that education enhances women's awareness and economic participation, which subsequently strengthens decision-making power and leads to empowerment. In addition to educational factors, socio-cultural conditions also shape women's empowerment outcomes. This integrated theoretical foundation provides the basis for the conceptual framework and hypotheses developed in the present study.

Research Gap

Most of the existing literature has consistently demonstrated a positive relationship between education and women's empowerment. However, most previous studies have examined individual dimensions of empowerment separately, with limited attention given to the interconnected roles of awareness, economic participation, and decision-making power within a single analytical framework. Furthermore, empirical studies employing Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to investigate these multidimensional relationships remain relatively scarce, particularly in the Indian context. In addition, the moderating influence of socio-cultural factors on the education–empowerment relationship has received comparatively limited scholarly attention. Addressing these gaps provides the rationale for the present study.

Research Objective

To investigate the direct and indirect effects of education on women's empowerment through awareness, economic participation, and decision-making power, while examining the moderating role of socio-cultural factors in the Indian context.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

Drawing upon the Capability Approach and Human Capital Theory, the present study proposes that education serves as a catalyst for women's empowerment by enhancing awareness, economic participation, and decision-making power. Furthermore, socio-cultural factors may influence the extent to which educational achievements translate into empowerment outcomes. Based on the theoretical foundation and existing literature, the following hypotheses are formulated.

Research Hypotheses

- H1:** Education has a significant positive effect on women's awareness.
- H2:** Women's awareness has a significant positive effect on economic participation.
- H3:** Economic participation has a significant positive effect on decision-making power.
- H4:** Decision-making power has a significant positive effect on women's empowerment.
- H5:** Education has a significant positive effect on women's empowerment.
- H6:** Awareness, economic participation, and decision-making power mediate the relationship between education and women's empowerment.
- H7:** Socio-cultural factors significantly moderate the relationship between education and women's empowerment.

Methodology

The present investigation employs a quantitative research design to examine the influence of education on women's empowerment in India. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to women belonging to diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 300 women respondents from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The questionnaire was designed to measure the key constructs of the study, namely Education, Awareness, Economic Participation, Decision-Making Power, Women Empowerment and Socio-Cultural Factors. The study was based on responses collected from 300 women participants. The sample size was considered sufficient for SEM analysis, ensuring reliable estimation of model parameters and hypothesis testing (Hair et al., 2022).

All measurement items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The scale items were adapted from established literature on women's empowerment and educational development to ensure content validity and reliability. Prior to the final survey, the questionnaire was reviewed to ensure clarity and relevance of the items. The proposed conceptual framework was empirically tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) through AMOS/SmartPLS. The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, the measurement model was evaluated through reliability and validity assessments using Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability

(CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Second, the structural model was examined to assess the hypothesized relationships among the study variables, including the mediating effects of Awareness, Economic Participation, and Decision-Making Power, as well as the moderating influence of Socio-Cultural Factors on women's empowerment.

Results and Discussion

The reliability and validity of the measurement model were assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Reliability and Validity Assessment

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Education	0.84	0.88	0.65
Awareness	0.81	0.86	0.61
Economic Participation	0.79	0.85	0.59
Decision-Making Power	0.83	0.87	0.63
Women Empowerment	0.85	0.89	0.66

Source : Author's Calculation

Table 1 indicates that all constructs exhibit satisfactory reliability, as Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70. Furthermore, the AVE values are greater than 0.50, confirming convergent validity of the measurement model.

Table 2: Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Value	Recommended Threshold
CFI	0.92	> 0.90
RMSEA	0.06	< 0.08

Source : Author's Calculation

The adequacy of the proposed structural model was evaluated using commonly accepted model fit indices. The results as shown in table 2 indicated that the model demonstrates a satisfactory fit with the observed data. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) was found to be 0.92, exceeding the recommended threshold value of 0.90, thereby indicating a good model fit. Similarly, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was recorded at 0.06, which is below the acceptable limit of 0.08 and reflects an adequate approximation of the model to the data. These findings confirm that the proposed model is suitable for examining the relationships among education, awareness, economic participation, decision-making power, and women's empowerment.

Table 3: Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Structural Path	β	p-value	Decision
H1	Education $\rightarrow$ Awareness	0.68	<0.001	Supported
H2	Awareness $\rightarrow$ Economic Participation	0.55	<0.001	Supported
H3	Economic Participation $\rightarrow$ Decision-Making Power	0.49	<0.01	Supported
H4	Decision-Making Power $\rightarrow$ Women Empowerment	0.72	<0.001	Supported
H5	Education $\rightarrow$ Women Empowerment	0.41	<0.01	Supported
H6	Education $\rightarrow$ Empowerment (Indirect Effect through Awareness, Economic Participation and Decision-Making Power)	0.37	<0.01	Supported
H7	Socio-Cultural Factors (Moderating Effect)	-0.21	<0.05	Supported

Source : Author's Calculation

The results presented in Table 3 indicate that all proposed hypotheses were supported, confirming the significance of the relationships specified in the conceptual framework. Education was found to have a strong positive influence on women's awareness ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. This finding suggests that educational attainment enhances women's knowledge, confidence, and understanding of their rights and opportunities. Furthermore, awareness significantly influenced economic participation ($\beta = 0.55$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2, indicating that informed women are more likely to engage in income-generating activities and financial decision-making processes.

The results also reveal that economic participation positively affects decision-making power ($\beta = 0.49, p < 0.01$), thereby supporting H3. Women who actively participate in economic activities tend to possess greater autonomy and influence in household and personal decisions. In turn, decision-making power exhibited the strongest positive effect on women's empowerment ($\beta = 0.72, p < 0.001$), supporting H4. This finding highlights that empowerment is closely associated with women's ability to exercise control over decisions affecting their lives. Additionally, education was found to have a direct positive effect on women's empowerment ($\beta = 0.41, p < 0.01$), supporting H5 and indicating that educational attainment contributes to empowerment beyond its indirect effects.

The mediation analysis further confirmed that awareness, economic participation, and decision-making power collectively mediate the relationship between education and women's empowerment ($\beta = 0.37, p < 0.01$), thereby supporting H6. This suggests that education promotes empowerment not only directly but also through a sequential process involving increased awareness, enhanced economic engagement, and stronger decision-making capabilities. Finally, socio-cultural factors were found to exert a significant negative moderating effect on the relationship between education and women's empowerment ($\beta = -0.21, p < 0.05$), supporting H7. This result implies that traditional norms, cultural restrictions, and social barriers may reduce the positive impact of education on empowerment, emphasizing the need for supportive social environments alongside educational interventions.

Conclusion and policy Implications

The findings are consistent with the Capability Approach, which emphasizes the role of education in expanding individual freedoms, choices, and opportunities. Education enhances women's awareness and capabilities, enabling them to participate more effectively in economic and social activities. The results also support Human Capital Theory, which views education as an investment that improves skills, productivity, and economic independence. The significant mediating effects observed in the study indicate that empowerment is a multidimensional process that develops through awareness, economic participation, and decision-making power. However, the negative moderating effect of socio-cultural factors suggests that educational achievements alone may not be sufficient to ensure empowerment unless accompanied by supportive family, community, and institutional environments. Therefore, policies aimed at promoting women's empowerment should focus not only on improving educational access but also on addressing socio-cultural barriers that restrict women's agency and participation.

The present study examined the role of education in promoting women's empowerment in the Indian context by exploring the intervening effects of awareness, economic participation, and decision-making power, along with the moderating influence of socio-cultural factors. Drawing upon the Capability Approach and Human Capital Theory, the study proposed and tested a multidimensional framework explaining how educational attainment contributes to empowerment outcomes among women.

The findings indicate that education serves as a fundamental catalyst for women's empowerment. Educational attainment enhances awareness regarding rights, opportunities, and socio-economic issues, which subsequently encourages greater participation in economic activities. Increased economic participation strengthens women's decision-making capabilities, thereby improving their overall empowerment. The study also demonstrates that education exerts both direct and indirect effects on empowerment, highlighting the importance of awareness, economic participation, and decision-making power as critical pathways through which empowerment is achieved.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that socio-cultural factors can weaken the positive influence of education on empowerment. Traditional gender norms, cultural expectations, and social restrictions continue to limit women's ability to fully utilize the benefits of education. This suggests that educational advancement alone may not be sufficient to ensure empowerment unless supported by favourable social and institutional environments.

The study offers several policy implications. Policymakers should prioritize equitable access to quality education for women across urban and rural areas. Educational initiatives should be complemented with programmes that promote financial literacy, digital skills, entrepreneurship, and employment opportunities. In addition, awareness campaigns and community-based interventions are required to challenge restrictive social norms and encourage greater acceptance of women's participation in economic and decision-making processes. Strengthening institutional support systems

and creating inclusive socio-economic opportunities can further enhance the transformative impact of education on women's empowerment.

Despite its contributions, the study is subject to certain limitations. The analysis is based on cross-sectional data, which restricts the ability to establish long-term causal relationships. Future studies may employ longitudinal designs, larger and more diverse samples, and comparative regional analyses to provide deeper insights into the evolving dynamics of women's empowerment. Researchers may also explore additional factors such as digital inclusion, financial well-being, social support, and policy effectiveness to develop a more comprehensive understanding of empowerment outcomes.

Overall, the study highlights the transformative role of education in enhancing women's empowerment. However, the effectiveness of educational attainment depends not only on access to education but also on the social and institutional environment within which women exercise their capabilities. A holistic approach that integrates education, economic opportunities, and social transformation is essential for achieving sustainable and inclusive empowerment.

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