



Received: 01-05-2025
Accepted: 10-06-2025

International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies

ISSN: 2583-049X

Evolution of Women Empowerment as an International Development Discourse

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62225/2583049X.2025.5.3.4474>

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Abstract

Women constitute half of the world's population, but they have been frequently experiencing discrimination and intolerance for a long period. Her role as a social promoter is misjudged, she is forced to endure the brunt of hardship and embarrassment in their whole life. The Millennium Development Goals recognized gender equality and women

empowerment as two key components for improving the well-being of all people and conclusively the development of humanity. The present paper seeks to explore the evolution of women empowerment in the context of its emergence as a central theme in international development discourse.

Keywords: Development, Gender Equality, International, Women Empowerment

Introduction

Background

Women constitute half of the world's population, but they have been frequently experiencing discrimination and intolerance for a long period. Her role as a social promoter is misjudged and she is forced to endure the brunt of hardship and embarrassment in their whole life. A number of organizations and coteries have been formed to defend and support women's movements on different platforms and raise their status to enlarge their social choices. The Millennium Development Goals recognized gender equality and women's empowerment as two key components for improving the well-being of all people in general and women in particular (United Nations, 2005) ^[14]. Women's empowerment and gender equality have gained a top priority over years (Singh & Singh, 2020) ^[10] and concerned international organisations have commenced a number of ground-breaking and purposeful initiatives to eliminate the gender gap. In his message on International Women's Day 2020, Antonio Guterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, emphasized the importance of "innovations by women and girls, for women and girls" in achieving gender equality. International organisations joined to pave the way for social progress, and gender justice and made a good effort to create an atmosphere that will ensure the multidimensional development of women on a long-term basis.

Literature Review

Women empowerment is regarded as a process of gaining strategic life choices through the interlinked dimensions of resources, agency, and achievements. It not only entails more access to opportunities or resources to women, but also helpful in amplifying their voice and agency to make decisions that have more meanings in their lives (Kabeer N., 1999; Nath & Das, 2024 ^[7]). The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and later the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) explicitly identified gender equality and women's empowerment as key enablers to pursuit inclusive development (UNDP, 2015) ^[13]. Women empowerment is a deep and context-specific process shaped by lived experiences, choices and constraints; thus, the development agencies must act beyond symbolic interventions and engage more deeply to support strategical transformations happening in the society (Cornwall & Edwards, 2010) ^[1]. Global development indicators suggests that nations prioritising investments in education, reproductive health, and legal reforms are tend to achieve more sustained progress in advancing

gender equity (The World Bank, 2012) ^[11]. Accordingly, women's empowerment remains to be an evolving process that demand sustained global commitment and implementation of geographically contextualized strategies.

Objective

To trace the evolution of women empowerment in the international context.

Methodology

The study uses literature-based approach to trace the historical evolution of women empowerment within international development frameworks. It draws upon scholarly articles, policy documents, and global reports, to analyse key strategies over time.

The Evolution of Women Empowerment Over the Years

Historically, the traditional patriarchal structure of society has granted a supporting role for women in the social, economic, and political spheres. Though some women have risen to sky-high fame both socially and economically, the status of women still remains deprived. The concept of women empowerment regained worldwide importance in the 20th century, after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, which fostered the necessity and significance of freedom and comparable rights without any gender discrimination.

Social movements and the community's determination to acknowledge the condition of women gave a momentum for women empowerment initiatives in Western countries. It can be broadly divided into three phases, the first of which began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, following the Industrial Revolution, World War I, and World War II. The second phase consisted of women's sexual and gender revolution to expose their role in society. The final phase consisted of feminist ideology, which emerged around the beginning of the 1990s. Numerous events that transpired in the past have made an impact on people's perception of women's status in society and the demand for restoration of women's status in the same social structure. The UN charter, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the World Conference on Women, and the International Commission on the State of Women joined hands to pave the way for sustainable development and women's empowerment.

Women's organizations began to collaborate with the League of Nations in the 1920s and 1930s, and it became the first intergovernmental peace organization involved in the empowerment of women. After the formation of United Nations (UN) and International Labour Organization (ILO), women's organizations made careful observations about their activities and they offered numerous suggestions and proposals for strengthening women. In the late 1920s, the Liaison Committee of Women's International Organizations, also known as the Voice of Women, continued to work and campaign for women's rights, gender autonomy, and freedom for women at all levels (Robinson, 2019) ^[9]. Famous American politician Carol Miller briefly outlined two accomplishments to illustrate the connection between the League of Nations and the women's movement. Primarily, women created a model for cooperation and communication between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and intergovernmental organizations. Secondly, the women-related international institutions succeeded in

drawing global attention to women's issues and set out agendas through their well-crafted proposals and actions. They attempted to show that issues related to women's status were global issues and not just domestic or regional (United Nations H., 2014) ^[15].

The legacy of the women's coalition was carried on by organizations like the International Alliance of Women (IAW), the International Council of Women (ICW), the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, the International Cooperative Women's Guild (ICWG), the World Young Women's Christian Association (WYWCA), the International Federation of University Women (IFUW), and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), which were found mostly in Europe and the United States.

The Inter-American Commission of Women (IACW) was the first intergovernmental organization based in Latin America and was established in 1928 to address women's issues (Towns, 2010) ^[12]. The UN "Blue Book" series on the progress of women split the feminist movements into distinct time periods. The first stage, from 1945 to 1962, focused on establishing the legal framework for equality; the second, from 1963 to 1975, on acknowledging the contribution of women to development; the third, during the UN Women Decade, from 1976 to 1985; and finally, the fourth stage, beginning in 1986, on focusing on equality, development, and peace.

By the year 1962 multiple conventions were conducted by UN UNESCO and ILO such as the Suppression of Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others (1949), the Convention Concerning Equal Remuneration for Men and Women Workers for Work of Equal Value (ILO 1951), the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1952), the Convention on the Nationality of Married Women (1957), the International Convention against Discrimination in Education (UNESCO 1960), and the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age of Marriage, and Registration of Marriages (1962). Later, family planning was included for the first time in the Declaration of Tehran, a by-product of the International Conference on Human Rights, and is regarded as a component of women's basic rights that received more support within women's circles. The United Nations' special agencies, like UNICEF and the United Nations Population Fund, trained their volunteers to promote family planning programs among women, especially those from underdeveloped countries. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (the Convention on the Rights of Women), came into existence in 1979 and was considered to be the most significant international legal session adopted by the UN for women. The convention incorporated the concepts of gender equality and women's right to undergo family planning programs. Both the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights clearly defined that human rights must be equally enjoyed by men and women. Conventions became successful in incorporating the principles of gender equality and women empowerment into the provisions of international law. But, some loopholes were seen in the law, and the Convention on Women's Rights overlooked these issue. Later in 1985, at the Nairobi conference, while reviewing the accomplishments of the women's decade, they observed and seriously discussed the concern about violence against women. The Declaration on

the Elimination of Violence Against Women (Prepared by CSW), was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1993 and thereafter published on International Women's Day in 1995. Similarly, in 1994, the Inter-American Convention on Violence Against Women (commonly known as the Convention of Belém do Pará) presented by the Organisation of American States (OAS), a well-known group of Latin American nations, established that women have the right to live a life free of violence and that violence against women is a violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The Commission on the Status of Women is the principal global organization completely dedicated to the promotion of women's empowerment and gender equality in society. The representatives used to gather twice in a year at UN headquarters to discuss the progress made in women empowerment and submit recommendations before the Economic and Social Council, the parental body for further analysis. The General Assembly convened a conference in Mexico and declared 1975 as International Women's Year and March 8th as the international day for the first time. The proclamation made in the conference to celebrate 1976-85 as the UN Decade for Women was an important milestone in the history of women's empowerment.

The second UN World Conference on Women known as the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women or as the mid-decade conference assembled 145 members of the UN together in Copenhagen in 1980. The conference reviewed reports from various governments to analyse the progress made in achieving the goals raised from the first conference in Mexico in 1975 based on equity and development in education and employment. A Programme of Action was adopted in the Second Half of the United Nations Decade for Women to enforce stronger measures to establish women's right for inheritance, right for property, and right to have child custody. Several other topics also came up during the conference.

Following the publication of the Copenhagen Report, the International Labour Organization (ILO) revealed that women, who comprise half of the world's population, hold only one-hundredth of all assets and property, earn only one-tenth of the world's total income, and make up two-thirds of the working class, the majority of whom work in the informal sector (ILO, 1984) ^[3]. In order to prompt women empowerment and autonomy and to protect their rights and freedom, the general assembly of the UN acclaimed the "Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women" which was held on 3rd September 1981.

Nairobi hosted the 1985 World Conference to Review and Appraise the UN Decade for Women's Achievements. The conference's purpose was to come up with ways to overcome barriers to carry out the goals of the women's decade. The world conference in Nairobi released specific outlines and recommendations to the government for the empowerment of women by adopting certain strategies for achieving the goals and ensuring participation of women in key areas consisting of education, employment, food, health science and technology, communications, housing, transport, energy, environment, social service, and so on. A group of women researchers from developing nations formed a chain group known as Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), before the Nairobi Conference in 1984, and studied the past and present

development from women's perspective.

The UN's fourth World Conference for Women took place in Beijing in 1995 offered special emphasis on the welfare of children and discussed the relationship and responsibilities of men and women towards family as well as to society. The summit made recommendations for maintaining equality and peace in domestic life from the perspective of women empowerment. In the last two decades, NGOs, governmental agencies, and other international bodies have been implementing grassroots-level assignments for generating income-generating, business-supportive, and skill-development-oriented projects for rehabilitating the underprivileged groups in society, particularly women and tribal folks. Until 1990, the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), focused on environmental issues right, but from 1990 onwards, WEDO invited women from all over the world and organised a series of World Women's Congress, international gatherings that brought together women from diverse backgrounds and regions to discuss and address issues related to women's rights and gender equality. Also, the Human Development Reports since 1990s, have been covering a wide range of topics pertaining to gender gaps, in addition to its main metrics including employment, health, and education.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, a number of follow-up sessions were conducted by the UN General Assembly to assess the remarks on ongoing projects work on women empowerment. First, a special session was conducted in 2000 to review and assess the implementation of the Beijing platforms' guidelines over the previous five years and plan for future arrangements. This initiative known to be "Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development, and Peace for the Twenty-First Century" and issued a political declaration to implement the allegiance at the Beijing conference. In 2005, a ten-year review session of the Beijing platform was arranged as a part of the 49th Commission on the Status of Women. They embraced some policies and delegations for the effective implementation of decisions in the Beijing conference focused on those development objectives, enclosed in the Millennium Declaration. Again in 2015, a twenty-year review meeting of the Beijing platform took place during the 59th session, which extended their focus and service to ensure gender equality and women empowerment as the agendas of the post-2015 development era.

The United Nations Millennium Declaration, in 2000, commits states to promote gender equality and women empowerment as the third of eight targets. It essentially intends to empower women by making them aware of their incredible strength, self-reliability, and independence. Intellectuals concurred that gender equality and women's empowerment were the two fundamental concepts for achieving every Millennium Development Goal. It ran out of steam in 2015, and the UN announced the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a "blueprint to ensure a better and more sustainable future for all" to effectively execute the 17 sustainable development objectives from that year. Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls is the fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). It intends to guarantee equal access to education, health care, freedom to work, pursue a career, representation in governmental and political institutions, and participation in household decision-making and to keep women at the

forefront nation's development and prosperity.

Conclusion

Women empowerment has remained a widely discussed topic for decades. International organizations and governments continue to implement policies, schemes, and strategies aimed at protecting women's self-esteem and promoting their empowerment, in pursuit of the long-cherished goal of achieving gender equality. Despite these efforts, a lot of women still continue to live in a deprived state, especially women from vulnerable communities. The situation warrants the need for new initiatives from the women's side to turn them into the wheels and feathers of society. Along with the support of government institutions and organisations, a woman herself must have the courage to advocate their rights and freedom to reflect the real spirit and dreams of her life. For succeeding and realising sustainable development, it is important to expand women's potential and enable them as active participants in the restoration of the nation.

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