

## A Study on Women's Role in Socio-Economic Development- Past and Present Scenarios

Prof. Sujata Pradip Phadtare

Assistant Professor, Rajmata Jijau Shikshan Prasarak Mandal's Arts, Commerce and Science College,  
Landewadi, Bhosari, Pune

### Abstract

Women have played a significant role in economic development across different historical periods, although their contributions have often been undervalued or underrepresented in formal economic systems. Traditionally, women were primarily engaged in household responsibilities, subsistence agriculture, and informal economic activities that supported family livelihoods but were rarely recognized in national economic statistics. Over time, socio-economic transformations such as industrialization, urbanization, education, and policy interventions have expanded women's participation in formal sectors of the economy. In the contemporary era, women actively contribute to diverse fields including entrepreneurship, corporate leadership, technology, governance, and service industries. Their increasing economic participation has strengthened productivity, household welfare, and national economic growth. Despite these advancements, challenges such as gender wage gaps, occupational segregation, limited access to financial resources, and social barriers continue to persist. This study examines the changing economic roles of women from historical contexts to the present and highlights their evolving contribution to sustainable economic development and inclusive growth.

**Keywords:** *Women's Economic Participation, Gender Equality, Labour Force Participation, Women Empowerment, Economic Development, Gender Roles, Women in Workforce*

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### 1. Introduction

Women have historically played a crucial role in economic systems, although their contributions were often confined to informal and unpaid activities such as household management, subsistence farming, and family-based enterprises. In early agrarian and pre-industrial societies, women's economic work was largely invisible in formal economic statistics despite being fundamental to community survival and social stability. Over time, scholars began recognizing that women's participation in economic activities contributes significantly to productivity, household welfare, and national economic development. Contemporary economic theories highlight that gender inclusion in labour markets expands the available workforce and enhances economic efficiency, thereby strengthening overall economic growth (Baerlocher, Parente, & Rios-Neto, 2021). Moreover, increasing female labour participation is widely considered an essential component of inclusive and sustainable development strategies in both developed and developing economies (Verick, 2018). The transformation of women's economic roles accelerated during the industrial and post-industrial periods, when education, urbanization, and technological progress created new employment opportunities. Women gradually moved from domestic and agricultural work to formal employment in sectors such as manufacturing, services, education, healthcare, and entrepreneurship. Research indicates that higher levels of female labour force participation contribute positively to economic productivity and national income by increasing the effective labour supply and

promoting innovation within organizations (Sulaiman, 2024). In addition, gender parity in education, governance, and employment has been found to influence long-term economic growth and development outcomes in various countries (Mubiinzi, 2025). These developments illustrate that women's economic empowerment is not only a social justice issue but also a key factor in strengthening national economic performance.

In the contemporary global economy, women actively contribute to multiple sectors including entrepreneurship, digital industries, public administration, and corporate leadership. Governments and international organizations increasingly emphasize policies that promote women's economic participation, financial inclusion, and skill development to achieve sustainable growth. Studies on women's economic empowerment demonstrate that providing women with access to education, credit facilities, and entrepreneurial opportunities significantly enhances income generation and social development outcomes (Balasubramanian et al., 2024). At the same time, persistent challenges such as gender wage gaps, occupational segregation, and limited access to leadership positions continue to restrict the full utilization of women's economic potential. Understanding the historical evolution of women's economic roles and examining their present contributions is therefore essential for designing policies that promote equitable and sustainable economic development.

## **2. Background of Study**

The economic role of women has undergone significant transformation across different historical periods as societies shifted from agrarian to industrial and knowledge-based economies. Traditionally, women were primarily engaged in unpaid household work, subsistence agriculture, and informal family businesses, which contributed to economic survival but remained largely unrecognized in official economic records. Over time, economic development, educational expansion, and policy reforms have created opportunities for women to participate more actively in formal labour markets. Economic research indicates that women's participation in the labour force plays an important role in improving productivity, increasing household income, and strengthening national economic growth (Alruwaili, 2024). In modern economies, the integration of women into paid employment has also been linked with broader socio-economic outcomes such as poverty reduction, improved health, and enhanced educational opportunities for future generations (Verick, 2018). In recent decades, global attention has increasingly focused on gender equality and women's economic empowerment as essential elements of sustainable development. International organizations and governments have emphasized the need to close gender gaps in employment, wages, and leadership positions. Despite progress, women still participate in the labour market at lower rates compared to men in many countries. Global labour statistics show that women's labour force participation remains significantly lower than that of men, reflecting structural barriers such as unpaid care responsibilities, limited access to resources, and social norms that influence employment opportunities (UN Women, 2024). Furthermore, comparative economic studies reveal that increasing female labour force participation contributes positively to economic output and national welfare by expanding the productive workforce and enhancing human capital development (Baerlocher, Parente, & Rios-Neto, 2021).

The contemporary economic landscape highlights both progress and challenges in women's economic participation. In many developing countries, policy initiatives such as skill development programs, self-help groups, financial inclusion schemes, and entrepreneurship support programs have encouraged women to enter the workforce and contribute to local economic development. For instance, government initiatives in India have significantly increased women's labour force participation, rising from 23.3% in 2017–18

to 41.7% in 2023–24, reflecting improvements in employment opportunities and economic empowerment. However, persistent challenges such as gender wage disparities, limited representation in leadership roles, and unequal access to financial and technological resources continue to hinder women's full economic participation (International Labour Organization, 2024). Understanding the historical evolution and current trends in women's economic roles therefore provides an important foundation for analysing how women contribute to economic development in both past and present contexts.

### **3. Scope Significant of Study**

The scope of the present study focuses on examining the historical and contemporary role of women in economic development by comparing their contributions in traditional societies with their participation in modern economic systems. The study analyses how women's roles have evolved from unpaid domestic and agricultural labour to active participation in formal sectors such as entrepreneurship, corporate employment, governance, and digital industries. It also explores the socio-economic factors that have influenced this transformation, including education, technological advancement, policy reforms, and globalization. By analysing both historical perspectives and present economic participation, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the changing dynamics of women's economic roles across time (Klasen, 2019). Furthermore, understanding these transitions helps researchers and policymakers identify the structural changes that have enabled women to participate more effectively in economic activities and contribute to overall economic productivity (Goldin, 2021).

The significance of this study lies in highlighting the importance of women's participation in economic development and national growth. Women constitute nearly half of the global population, and their economic inclusion has a direct impact on productivity, poverty reduction, and sustainable development. Research shows that improving gender equality in labour markets can significantly increase national income and economic stability by expanding the workforce and improving human capital development (World Bank, 2022). By analysing the historical evolution and present contributions of women in the economy, the study provides valuable insights for policymakers, academicians, and development practitioners working toward gender-inclusive economic development (Elborgh-Woytek et al., 2013). The study is also significant in addressing existing gender disparities and identifying areas where policy intervention is required to promote women's economic empowerment. Despite considerable progress, challenges such as wage inequality, occupational segregation, limited access to financial resources, and socio-cultural barriers continue to affect women's participation in economic activities. Examining women's economic roles from both historical and contemporary perspectives enables a better understanding of these persistent challenges and provides evidence for designing effective policy frameworks and institutional support systems (Duflo, 2012).

### **4. Objectives of the Study**

- To examine the historical role of women in economic activities and their contribution to traditional economic systems
- To analyze the transformation in women's economic participation from traditional societies to the modern global economy
- To identify the major socio-economic factors that have influenced women's participation in economic development

- To study the role of education, technology, and policy interventions in enhancing women's economic empowerment
- To evaluate the contribution of women in contemporary sectors such as entrepreneurship, corporate leadership, and digital economies

## **5. Review of Literature**

The role of women in economic development has been widely examined in academic literature, particularly in relation to labour force participation and economic growth. Studies highlight that the integration of women into economic activities significantly improves productivity, household income, and overall economic development. According to Goldin (2014), the evolution of women's economic roles has followed a U-shaped pattern where participation declined during early industrialization but increased significantly in modern economies due to education, service sector expansion, and social change. This transformation indicates that economic development and structural change in labour markets create opportunities for women to move from informal and domestic work into formal employment sectors. Research further emphasizes that improving gender equality in labour participation contributes to long-term economic stability and inclusive development.

Duflo (2012) examined the relationship between women's empowerment and economic development and found that empowering women leads to improved economic outcomes, including higher investment in health, education, and family welfare. Furthermore, research on women entrepreneurship highlights that women-owned businesses contribute significantly to employment generation, innovation, and local economic growth. Studies in developing countries indicate that policies promoting microfinance, skill development, and entrepreneurship training have strengthened women's economic participation.

Recent studies also focus on the emerging role of women in modern economic sectors such as digital economies, leadership positions, and knowledge-based industries. With the expansion of technology and globalization, women are increasingly participating in professional and managerial roles across industries. World Bank (2023) reported that policies supporting equal opportunities, workplace flexibility, and financial inclusion have played a critical role in improving women's labour market participation worldwide. However, despite these advancements, gender disparities in wages, leadership representation, and access to financial resources remain persistent challenges in many economies. The literature therefore suggests that strengthening gender-inclusive policies and institutional support systems is essential for enhancing women's contribution to sustainable economic development.

Recent literature further emphasizes the role of enabling and mediating factors such as financial inclusion, digital literacy, and institutional support in translating women's participation into measurable development outcomes. The integration of technology and access to financial resources has allowed women to engage in entrepreneurship and innovation, thereby strengthening their economic independence and societal status (Sen, 1999). Empirical and analytical studies indicate that when women gain access to productive resources and decision-making power, there is a multiplier effect on household welfare and national economic growth. This transformation aligns with contemporary development paradigms, including the Sustainable Development Goals, which position gender equality as both an objective and a catalyst for development. Consequently, the shift from traditional constraints to modern empowerment frameworks underscores the critical role of women as agents of socio-economic transformation (World Bank, 2020)

6. Discussion and Analysis

Figure 1: Women in the Past and Present



**Table 1: Comparative Analysis: Women’s Economic Role – Past Vs Present**

Dimension	Past (Pre-Modern / Industrial Period)	Present (21st Century)
Recognition of Women’s Work	Women’s work was largely invisible and not counted in economic statistics. Most contributions were confined to household production, subsistence farming, and unpaid family labour.	Women’s work is increasingly recognized and measured through labour force participation statistics, though unpaid care work still remains underreported in many economies.
Types of Work	Work was primarily domestic, agricultural, and informal in nature, such as food preparation, handicrafts, and family-based occupations.	Women participate in diverse sectors including corporate employment, entrepreneurship, digital industries, public administration, education, healthcare, and professional services.
Access to Education	Educational opportunities for women were highly restricted due to social norms and cultural barriers.	Education access has expanded significantly, and many countries have achieved near gender parity in primary and secondary education, with growing female participation in higher education.
Wage Equality	Wage equality was almost non-existent because women’s work was undervalued and often unpaid or poorly compensated.	Legal frameworks and labour policies promoting equal pay exist, though gender wage gaps continue to persist in many regions.
Property Rights	Women had limited or no legal rights to own or inherit property in many traditional societies.	Property rights have expanded through legal reforms, enabling women to own assets and inherit property, although implementation varies across regions.
Entrepreneurship	Opportunities for women entrepreneurs were minimal due to financial, social, and institutional barriers.	Women entrepreneurship is growing rapidly, particularly through digital platforms, start-ups, micro-enterprises, and self-help group initiatives.

**7. Findings of Study**

- The study reveals that women have historically contributed significantly to economic activities; however, their work in traditional societies remained largely invisible because it was mainly confined to unpaid domestic labour, subsistence agriculture, and informal family-based occupations.
- Economic development, education, industrialization, and technological advancement have significantly transformed women's economic roles, enabling them to participate in diverse sectors such as corporate employment, entrepreneurship, public administration, and digital industries.
- The increased access to education and skill development programs has played a crucial role in improving women's labour force participation and enhancing their economic independence and decision-making power within households and society.
- The legal reforms and policy initiatives supporting gender equality, property rights, and financial inclusion have expanded opportunities for women in economic activities, although disparities in wage equality and leadership representation still persist.
- The growth of digital technologies and entrepreneurship ecosystems has created new opportunities for women to establish businesses and participate in the global economy, particularly through online platforms and innovation-driven enterprises.

## 8. Conclusion

The study highlights that women's economic roles have undergone a remarkable transformation from traditional societies to the modern global economy. In earlier periods, women primarily contributed through unpaid domestic work, subsistence agriculture, and informal family enterprises, which were rarely acknowledged in formal economic systems. Despite their substantial contributions to household survival and community welfare, these roles remained largely invisible in economic statistics and policy discussions. However, socio-economic changes such as industrialization, educational expansion, technological advancement, and policy reforms have gradually expanded opportunities for women to participate in formal economic activities. Today, women actively contribute to various sectors including entrepreneurship, corporate employment, governance, and digital industries, thereby playing a vital role in economic productivity and sustainable development. Strengthening women's access to education, skill development, financial inclusion, and entrepreneurial support can further enhance their participation in economic activities. Therefore, promoting gender-inclusive economic policies and addressing structural barriers are essential steps toward achieving equitable growth, social progress, and sustainable economic development in the 21st century.

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