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## **EMPOWERING WOMEN: THE ROLE OF LAW IN DRIVING SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article explores the role of law as a vital mechanism for "social engineering" in the ongoing transformation of women's social and economic status. By tracing the historical trajectory of women's rights from the intellectual equality of the early Vedic period to the significant decline and marginalisation during the medieval era, the study highlights how legal and social structures have dictated women's position in society.

The analysis examines the shift toward modernisation, beginning with colonial-era reforms that dismantled oppressive practices like sati and prohibited widow remarriage. It further details the robust legal framework of post-independence India, in which the Constitution serves as a cornerstone of equality, providing specific protections under Articles 14, 15, and 21 to address historical disadvantages. This domestic progress is contextualised within the global landscape, citing international instruments like CEDAW and landmark reforms in the UK and USA that moved beyond formal recognition toward practical measures for removing societal barriers.

Key contemporary developments are discussed, including economic empowerment through equal pay and maternity benefits, the protection of bodily autonomy via reproductive rights, and the securing of property rights through the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act. The article also evaluates the impact of recent political mandates, such as the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, and various government welfare schemes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, in fostering an inclusive society. Ultimately, the article concludes that while law has been a powerful catalyst for progress, achieving complete gender equality remains an ongoing process that requires addressing persistent challenges like gender-based violence and systemic underrepresentation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Social transformation refers to a significant and lasting change in the structure, values, institutions, relationships, and patterns of behaviour within a society. It involves the process through which society evolves from traditional forms of organisation to more progressive and equitable systems. Social transformation may occur through legal reforms, economic development, technological advancements, education, social movements, or political changes. **Roscoe Pound** viewed law as a tool of social engineering, capable of balancing competing interests and promoting social progress.<sup>1</sup> In essence, social transformation is the process of creating a more just, inclusive, and equitable society, and laws act as one of the most powerful mechanisms for achieving this objective.

The social and economic status of women refers to women's position in society and how these affect society. concerning education, employment, property rights, political participation, and access to opportunities. Throughout history, the status of women has undergone significant fluctuations, influenced by social customs, religious practices, economic conditions, and legal reforms. While women today enjoy greater rights and opportunities than in the past, challenges such as gender discrimination, wage inequality, and social barriers continue to exist. Therefore, examining the historical evolution, contemporary status, and legal framework relating to women is essential to understand the role of law in achieving social transformation and gender equality.

## II. INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

### 1. United Kingdom

The doctrine of coverture established in the United Kingdom deprived married woman of various rights relating to property and legal independence. The enactment of the Married Women's Property Act 1882 marked a turning point by allowing married women to own, manage, and dispose of property in their own names.<sup>2</sup> Political empowerment followed with the Representation of the People Act 1918, which granted voting rights to certain women, and the Equal Franchise Act 1928, which established voting equality between men and women.<sup>3</sup> These

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<sup>1</sup> Roscoe Pound, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Law* 47–48 (1922).

<sup>2</sup> Married Women's Property Act 1882, 45 & 46 Vict. c. 75 (U.K.).

<sup>3</sup> Representation of the People Act, 1918, 7 & 8 Geo. 5, c. 64 (U.K.); Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act, 1928, 18 & 19 Geo. 5, c. 12 (U.K.).

reforms enabled women to participate more actively in governance and economic decision-making.

## 2. The United States of America

Women faced legal and social barriers that restricted their property ownership and political participation. During the nineteenth century, various states enacted Married Women's Property Acts, granting women greater control over their property and earnings.<sup>4</sup> A landmark transformation occurred with the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, which guaranteed women's right to vote throughout the country.<sup>5</sup> Subsequent legislation, including the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, sought to eliminate gender-based discrimination in employment and promote economic equality.<sup>6</sup>

Today, women in both countries enjoy formal legal equality and have achieved significant progress in education, employment, and political representation. However, challenges such as gender pay disparities, underrepresentation in leadership positions, and unequal caregiving responsibilities persist. The experiences of the United States and the United Kingdom demonstrate that legal reforms not only protect rights but also reshape social attitudes and institutions, thereby advancing the broader goal of gender equality.

## 3. United Nations Role in Social Transformation

- **The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**

This is an international treaty adopted by the United Nations in 1979 to promote and protect the rights of women. It is widely regarded as the most comprehensive international instrument addressing gender discrimination. CEDAW was introduced because women continued to face inequalities in areas such as education, employment, political participation, property ownership, and family life despite the recognition of human rights and equality in earlier international instruments.

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<sup>4</sup>Richard H. Chused, *Married Women's Property Law: 1800–1850*, 71 *Geo. L.J.* 1359 (1983).

<sup>5</sup>U.S. Const. amend. XIX.

<sup>6</sup>Equal Pay Act of 1963, Pub. L. No. 88–38, 77 Stat. 56 (codified as amended at 29 U.S.C. § 206(d)); Civil Rights Act of 1964, Pub. L. No. 88–352, tit. VII, 78 Stat. 241, 253–66 (codified as amended at 42 U.S.C. §§ 2000e–2000e–17).

The Convention requires States to eliminate discriminatory laws, policies, and practices and to ensure that women enjoy equal rights and opportunities with men. It emphasises that true equality requires not only equal legal recognition but also practical measures to remove barriers that prevent women from fully participating in society.

CEDAW illustrates how international law functions as an instrumental mechanism for social transformation. By encouraging legal reforms and challenging discriminatory social norms, the Convention has contributed significantly to the advancement of women's social, political, and economic status throughout the world.<sup>7</sup>

### III. SOCIETAL EVOLUTION THROUGH THE LENS OF WOMEN'S STATUS

#### 1. Ancient Period

The status of women in ancient India was not uniform and underwent significant changes over time. During the early Vedic period, women generally enjoyed a respected position in society. They had access to education, participated in religious ceremonies, and were involved in intellectual and philosophical discussions. Women were permitted to study the Vedas, and some attained distinction as scholars and philosophers. Notable women such as Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi are remembered for their contributions to philosophical debates and Vedic learning.<sup>8</sup> Women also enjoyed a degree of freedom in choosing their spouses and actively participated in social and religious life.

However, the position of women gradually changed during the later Vedic or post-Vedic period. Indian society during ancient period, predominantly followed patriarchal values resulting in various restrictions like freedom and autonomy. Educational opportunities for women declined, and their role became increasingly confined to household and family responsibilities. Social norms began to emphasize obedience and dependence on male family members.<sup>9</sup> Although women continued to play important roles within the family structure, their participation in public and intellectual life became more limited. This era **initiated a progressive erosion** of women's status, a trajectory that **intensified** in subsequent centuries.

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<sup>7</sup> Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination **against** Women, Dec. 18, 1979, 1249 U.N.T.S. 13.

<sup>8</sup> A. S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* 14–45 (5th ed. 1995).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 46–78.

## 2. Medieval Period

The condition of women deteriorated considerably during the medieval period. Political instability, social conservatism, and rigid patriarchal practices contributed to the decline of women's status in society. Several customs, including child marriage, purdah, and restrictions on women's mobility and education, became increasingly prevalent.<sup>10</sup> Women were often denied opportunities for formal education and were largely excluded from public and political life.

Property rights and economic independence were also significantly restricted during this period. Although women contributed substantially to agriculture, handicrafts, family businesses, and household management, their labour was rarely recognised or rewarded independently. Their economic contributions were generally viewed as an extension of their domestic responsibilities rather than as productive work deserving separate recognition.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, social practices reinforced women's dependence on male family members and limited their ability to exercise independent choices. As a result, women had little control over property, education, marriage, or participation in public affairs. While there were exceptional women who exercised influence as rulers, administrators, or poets, these instances were rare and did not reflect the general condition of women in society.

Consequently, the medieval period is often regarded as one of the lowest points in the historical status of women in India. The widespread prevalence of discriminatory customs and the denial of educational, economic, and social opportunities significantly reduced women's autonomy and contributed to their marginalisation within society.<sup>12</sup>

## 3. Colonial Period

The colonial era was a **critical juncture** that fundamentally reshaped the **social and legal standing** of women in India. During this period, Indian society was characterised by several oppressive practices that adversely affected women, including sati, child marriage, restrictions on widow remarriage, and limited access to education.

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<sup>10</sup> R. C. Majumdar, *An Advanced History of India* 320–25 (3d ed. 1953).

<sup>11</sup> A. S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* 189–220 (2d ed. 1959).

<sup>12</sup> R. S. Sharma, *India's Ancient Past* 248–54 (2005).

Prominent social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar actively campaigned against practices that deprived women of dignity and equality. Raja Ram Mohan Roy strongly opposed the practice of sati, under which a widow was compelled to immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. His efforts, along with growing public concern, led to the enactment of the Bengal Sati Regulation, 1829, which declared the practice illegal and punishable by law.<sup>13</sup>

Another important reform during the colonial period was the enactment of the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, 1856. Widows in traditional Hindu society often faced severe social stigma and were denied the opportunity to remarry. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar played a leading role in advocating for legal recognition of widow remarriage. The Act legalised the remarriage of Hindu widows and represented a significant step towards improving their social status and personal freedom.<sup>14</sup>

The colonial period also witnessed growing efforts to promote women's education and challenge discriminatory social norms. Although progress was gradual, these reforms laid the foundation for later movements advocating gender equality and women's empowerment.

#### **4. Post-Independence Period and Constitutional Protection of Women's Rights in India**

After India gained independence in 1947, the framers of the Constitution recognised the need to create a democratic society based on equality, dignity, and justice. The Constitution of India became a powerful instrument for social transformation, especially in improving the status of women. It sought to remove centuries of discrimination and provide women with equal rights in political, social, and economic life.

- **Constitutional Guarantees of Equality and Dignity**

One of the most important protections provided by the Constitution is Article 14, which guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws to all persons within India.<sup>15</sup> This principle ensures that women and men are treated equally by the legal system.

Article 15 specifically prohibits all forms of discrimination on the grounds of religion, race,

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<sup>13</sup> Bengal Sati Regulation XVII of 1829 (India).

<sup>14</sup> Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act XV of 1856 (India).

<sup>15</sup> India Const. art. 14 (1950).

caste, sex, or place of birth.<sup>16</sup> It also allows the State to make special provisions for women and children, recognising that formal equality alone is not enough to overcome historical disadvantages faced by women.

Article 16 guarantees equality of opportunity in matters relating to public employment and appointments under the State.<sup>17</sup> This provision opened the doors for women to participate in government services and public institutions on an equal basis with men.

The Constitution also protects the broader human rights of women through Article 21, which guarantees the right to life and personal liberty.<sup>18</sup> Over time, the Supreme Court has interpreted this right to include dignity, privacy, health, and reproductive autonomy, thereby expanding the scope of women's rights.

- **Education, Work, and Economic Equality**

Education takes a crucial role in empowerment of women. Article 21A provides for free and compulsory education for children between the ages of six and fourteen years.<sup>19</sup> By ensuring access to education, the Constitution seeks to create equal opportunities for girls and boys alike.

The Directive Principles of State Policy further strengthen women's economic rights. Article 39(d) directs the State to ensure equal pay for equal work for both men and women.<sup>20</sup> This principle aims to eliminate wage disparities and promote economic justice in the workplace.

Similarly, Article 42 directs the State to secure just and humane conditions of work and provide maternity relief for women.<sup>21</sup> This reflects the constitutional commitment to protecting women's health, dignity, and welfare in employment.

- **Political Representation and Women's Participation**

The Constitution also promotes women's participation in governance. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments introduced reservations for women in Panchayats and Municipalities. Articles 243D (3) and 243D (4) reserve not less than one-third of the seats and

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<sup>16</sup> India Const. art. 15.

<sup>17</sup> India Const. art. 16.

<sup>18</sup> India Const. art. 21.

<sup>19</sup> India Const. art. 21A (1950).

<sup>20</sup> India Const. art. 39(d).

<sup>21</sup> India Const. art. 42.

chairperson positions in Panchayats for women, while Articles 243T (3) and 243T (4) provide similar reservations in Municipalities.<sup>22</sup> These provisions have enabled millions of women to enter local governance and participate in decision-making processes.

A major recent development is the Constitution (128th Amendment) Act, 2023, commonly known as the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam. It seeks to reserve one-third of the total seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies for women.<sup>23</sup> This amendment represents an important step toward achieving greater gender balance in higher levels of political representation.

## **5. Contemporary Status of Women**

In contemporary India, women have achieved remarkable progress in various spheres of life, including education, employment, entrepreneurship, politics, and public administration. Compared to earlier periods, women today enjoy greater access to educational opportunities, professional careers, and leadership positions. Their growing participation in economic activities has contributed not only to their personal empowerment but also to the overall development of society. Women are increasingly represented in fields such as law, medicine, business, science, technology, and governance, reflecting a gradual shift towards gender equality.

A significant factor behind this transformation has been the role of law. The Indian legal system has served as an important instrument of social change by challenging discriminatory practices and promoting equal rights for women. Constitutional guarantees of equality, coupled with progressive legislation, have helped remove many barriers that historically restricted women's participation in social and economic life. Laws relating to equal remuneration, maternity benefits, protection against domestic violence, workplace safety, inheritance rights, and political representation have strengthened the legal position of women and expanded their opportunities.

The law has also played a crucial role in addressing social evils such as dowry, child marriage, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and gender-based discrimination. Through legal reforms, the State has sought to protect women's dignity, ensure their safety, and promote their

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<sup>22</sup> India Const. arts. 243D (3) – (4), 243T (3) – (4).

<sup>23</sup> Constitution (One Hundred Twenty-Eighth Amendment) Act, No. 20 of 2023 (India).

full participation in society. Judicial jurisprudence has catalysed these objectives by construing constitutional rights through a lens of substantive gender justice and empowerment.

Despite significant achievements, challenges such as gender-based violence, wage disparities, and underrepresentation in leadership positions continue to exist. Nevertheless, the progress made since independence demonstrates how law can function as a powerful tool for social transformation. By promoting equality, protecting rights, and fostering opportunities, the legal system continues to contribute to the advancement of women's status in contemporary India.

#### **IV. LAW AS AN INSTRUMENT OF SOCIAL CHANGE: ADVANCING WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN INDIA**

Law plays a vital role in bringing about social change by addressing inequalities and protecting the rights of vulnerable groups. In India, a robust legislative framework has served as a **catalyst for multidimensional social transformation**, systematically dismantling structural barriers to women's equality across social, economic, and legal spheres. These laws not only provide legal protection but also seek to transform societal attitudes and promote gender equality.

##### **1. Economic and Workplace Empowerment**

- a) Economic independence is essential for women's empowerment. Recognising this, the Indian legislature has enacted several laws to ensure equal opportunities and safe working conditions for women.
- b) The **Equal Remuneration Act, 1976**, was enacted to eliminate gender-based wage discrimination and ensure that men and women receive equal pay for performing the same or similar work. The Act aimed to promote fairness in employment and encourage greater participation of women in the workforce.<sup>24</sup> Although its provisions have now been incorporated into the Code on Wages, 2019, its contribution to gender equality remains significant.
- c) The **Maternity Benefit Act, 1961**, as amended in 2017, recognises the importance of balancing motherhood and employment. The amendment increased paid maternity leave from twelve weeks to twenty-six weeks and introduced provisions requiring certain

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<sup>24</sup> Equal Remuneration Act, No. 25 of 1976 (India).

establishments to provide creche facilities.<sup>25</sup> These measures help women continue their professional careers while fulfilling their maternal responsibilities, thereby promoting workplace inclusion.

- d) The **Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013** (POSH Act) was enacted to ensure a safe and dignified working environment for women. The Act requires employers to establish Internal Complaints Committees and implement mechanisms for addressing complaints of workplace harassment.<sup>26</sup> By safeguarding women from harassment and intimidation, the law encourages greater participation of women in professional spaces.

## 2. Laws Relating to Protection from Violence and Exploitation

Violence and exploitation have historically hindered women's ability to enjoy their rights and freedoms. Several legislations have been enacted to address these challenges and provide legal remedies.

- a) The **Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005**, is a comprehensive law that recognises various forms of abuse, including physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, and economic abuse. It provides remedies such as protection orders, residence orders, and monetary relief for victims.<sup>27</sup> The Act reflects a broader understanding of domestic violence and seeks to ensure the safety and dignity of women within the household.
- b) The **Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006**, aims to prevent child marriages by making such marriages punishable under law. The legislation seeks to protect young girls from early marriage, which often deprives them of education, health, and opportunities for personal development.<sup>28</sup>
- c) The **Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961** criminalise the giving, taking, or demanding of dowry. The law was enacted to combat the social evil of dowry, which has been a major cause of

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<sup>25</sup> Maternity Benefit Act, No. 53 of 1961, § 5(3) (India), amended by Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, No. 6 of 2017 (India).

<sup>26</sup> Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, No. 14 of 2013 (India).

<sup>27</sup> Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, No. 43 of 2005 (India).

<sup>28</sup> Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, No. 6 of 2006 (India).

harassment, domestic violence, and dowry-related deaths.<sup>29</sup>

- d) The **Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987**, prohibits the practice of sati and its glorification. Enacted in response to incidents that highlighted the persistence of harmful traditional practices, the Act reflects the commitment of the legal system to protect women's right to life and dignity.<sup>30</sup>
- e) The **Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986** seeks to protect children from exploitation by prohibiting their employment in hazardous occupations and regulating working conditions where employment is permitted.<sup>31</sup> The legislation has particular significance for young girls who are often vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.
- f) The **Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POCSO)** provides a comprehensive legal framework for protecting children from sexual abuse and exploitation. The Act establishes child-friendly procedures for reporting, investigation, and trial, thereby ensuring better protection of children's rights.<sup>32</sup>

### 3. Autonomy, Property, and Healthcare Rights

Women's empowerment also depends upon their ability to exercise control over property, personal decisions, and healthcare choices.

- a) The **Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005** marked a significant step toward gender equality by granting daughters equal coparcenary rights in ancestral property. Before the amendment, daughters were excluded from coparcenary status in joint family property, meaning they did not possess the same inheritance rights as sons. The reform strengthened women's economic independence and enhanced their social status within the family and society.<sup>33</sup>
- b) Reproductive autonomy is another important aspect of women's rights. The **Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971**, as amended in 2021, permits abortion up to twenty

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<sup>29</sup> Dowry Prohibition Act, No. 28 of 1961 (India).

<sup>30</sup> Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, No. 3 of 1988 (India).

<sup>31</sup> Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, No. 61 of 1986 (India).

<sup>32</sup> Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, No. 32 of 2012 (India).

<sup>33</sup> Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, No. 39 of 2005 (India).

weeks under specified conditions and up to twenty-four weeks for certain categories of women. It also allows termination beyond twenty-four weeks in cases involving substantial fetal abnormalities, subject to statutory requirements.<sup>34</sup> The legislation recognises women's reproductive rights and seeks to protect their health, dignity, and bodily autonomy.

## V. GOVERNMENT SCHEMES FOR THE WELFARE AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Complementing constitutional mandates and statutory reforms, Central and State welfare schemes have **operationalised** gender justice by translating abstract rights into **tangible socio-economic entitlements**, directly addressing structural inequalities in health, education, and economic agency. These initiatives seek to address gender inequality, enhance women's access to healthcare and education, and promote their overall empowerment.

- a) The **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) Scheme**, launched in 2015, aims to address the declining child sex ratio and promote the education and welfare of girl children. The scheme focuses on preventing gender-biased sex selection, ensuring the survival and protection of girls, and encouraging their education and participation in society.<sup>35</sup>
- b) The **Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY)** provides financial assistance to eligible pregnant and lactating mothers for their first living child. Under the scheme, beneficiaries receive cash incentives in instalments to compensate for wage loss during pregnancy and to support adequate nutrition and healthcare.<sup>36</sup>
- c) The **Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY)** is a safe motherhood programme designed to reduce maternal and infant mortality by encouraging institutional deliveries. The scheme provides financial assistance to pregnant women, particularly those belonging to economically weaker sections, to ensure access to proper medical care during childbirth.<sup>37</sup>
- d) The **Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram (JSSK)** guarantees free and cashless delivery services for pregnant women in public health institutions. It also provides free medicines,

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<sup>34</sup> Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, No. 34 of 1971 (India), amended by Medical Termination of Pregnancy (Amendment) Act, No. 8 of 2021 (India).

<sup>35</sup> Ministry of Women & Child Development, *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao: Scheme Implementation Guidelines* (2019), <https://mahilakalyan.up.nic.in/BBBP%20Guideline.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana, Ministry of Women & Child Development, <https://wcd.gov.in/women/pradhan-mantri-matru-vandana-yojna> (last visited June 10, 2026).

<sup>37</sup> Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, *Janani Suraksha Yojana: Features and Guidelines* (2005).

diagnostic services, blood transfusions, transportation, and post-delivery care, thereby reducing the financial burden associated with childbirth.<sup>38</sup>

- e) The **Anganwadi Services Scheme**, implemented under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme, provides supplementary nutrition, health check-ups, immunisation, and nutrition education to women and children. The scheme plays a crucial role in improving maternal and child health and combating malnutrition.<sup>39</sup>
- f) The **Sukanya Samridhi Yojana**, which encourages parents to save for the future education and welfare of girl children through a government-supported savings scheme offering attractive interest rates and tax benefits.<sup>40</sup>
- g) The **Mahila Shakti Kendra Scheme** aims to empower rural women by providing opportunities for skill development, employment, digital literacy, and community participation. It seeks to strengthen women's ability to access government services and exercise their rights effectively.<sup>41</sup>
- h) The **One Stop Centre Scheme, popularly known as Sakhi Centers, offers comprehensive aid and unified support services to women who have experienced violence.** These centers offer legal aid, medical assistance, psychological counselling, temporary shelter, and other support services under a single roof.<sup>42</sup>
- i) The Mahila e Haat provides for a digital platform for marketing for women entrepreneurs, SHGs, and NGOs.<sup>43</sup>

Collectively, these schemes manifest the Indian state's unwavering commitment to dismantling structural inequities and reconstructing the socio-economic status of women. By focusing on education, healthcare, financial security, safety, and empowerment, these initiatives contribute significantly to achieving gender equality and social transformation.

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<sup>38</sup> Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, *Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram Operational Guidelines* (2011).

<sup>39</sup> Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Ministry of Women & Child Development, <https://icds.gov.in/en/about-us> (last visited June 10, 2026).

<sup>40</sup> Ministry of Finance, *Sukanya Samridhi Account Scheme, 2019*, Gazette of India, Pt. II, § 3(i) (Dec. 12, 2019).

<sup>41</sup> Ministry of Women & Child Development, *Mahila Shakti Kendra Scheme Guidelines* (2017).

<sup>42</sup> Ministry of Women & Child Development, *One Stop Centre Scheme Guidelines* (2015).

<sup>43</sup> Ministry of Women & Child Development, *Mahila e-Haat*, <https://vikaspedia.in/e-governance/women-and-e-governance/mahila-e-haat> (last visited June 10, 2026).

## VI. CONCLUSION

The historical progression of women's standing illustrates that social change is an active, intentional journey, with legislation serving as a strategic instrument of "**social engineering**" to drive this evolution. From the intellectual equality of the early Vedic period where scholars like Gargi and Maitreyi participated in philosophical debates to the "lowest points" of the Medieval era, characterised by rigid patriarchal restrictions and the denial of education, the journey has been one of reclaiming lost dignity.

The shift toward modern equality was catalysed by landmark legal interventions that challenged deep-seated social evils. During the colonial era, reformers **weaponised** the legal apparatus to **dismantle** entrenched oppressive customs, notably eradicating *sati* and **legitimising** widow remarriage. This paved the way for the Indian Constitution, which moved beyond formal equality (Article 14) to authorise special provisions that actively address historical disadvantages faced by women. Similarly, on the global stage, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) established that true equality requires practical measures to remove social and economic barriers, not just legal recognition.

Today, the **metamorphosis** is undeniable: women have **shattered the glass ceiling** of domesticity, emerging as **pioneering leaders** shaping the frontiers of law, medicine, and technology. This progress is anchored in legislation that secures economic autonomy, workplace safety, and bodily rights, such as the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act of 2005, which granted daughters equal property rights, and the POSH Act of 2013, which safeguards professional dignity. Furthermore, the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam represents a definitive step toward balancing power at the highest levels of governance.

Ultimately, while the legal system has successfully criminalised violence and expanded opportunities, social transformation remains an ongoing project. The persistence of gender-based violence and the "glass ceiling" in leadership indicates that law provides the essential framework, but achieving a truly equitable society requires the continuous alignment of legal mandates with shifting cultural attitudes.