

CSR and Women Empowerment Assessing the Impact of Corporate Programs on Gender Equality in India

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ABSTRACT

The Gender Gap Report 2024 ranks India 129th out of 146 countries, showing a 0.1% gain from 2023. Despite regulations encouraging workforce participation, women earn 18% of labour income and make up 27% of the workforce. CSR programs stipulated by Section 135 of the Companies Act, 2013, have transformed gender inequity. Companies must spend 2% of average net profits to CSR, including education, healthcare, rural development, gender equality, and more. Hindustan Unilever's Project Shakti, Tata Motors' Okhai, and ITC's Women Economic Empowerment Programme benefit rural and urban women through financial literacy, skill development, healthcare access, and livelihood creation. CSR spending increased 13% in 2022-23, demonstrating its expanding impact on women's financial liberty. Gender conventions, cultural sensitivities, and community participation and progress monitoring gaps remain obstacles. Corporations must prioritise grassroots research, stakeholder participation, and local initiatives to increase impact. Inclusive growth requires awareness campaigns and government-NGO cooperation. CSR can empower women, transform economic possibilities, and promote sustainable gender equality across industries by tackling these obstacles. This research emphasises the need for comprehensive policies that bridge socio-economic disparities and promote equitable development to empower women in rural and urban India.

Keywords: *Corporate Social Responsibility, Women's Empowerment, Gender Equality, CSR Initiatives, Social Impact, Economic Opportunities.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality remains a persistent problem in India, despite constitutional guarantees and policy frameworks aimed at ensuring equal rights. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2024, India ranks 129th out of 146 countries, up barely 0.1% from the previous year. Women make up only 27% of the national workforce and

earn only 18% of total labour income, emphasizing the strong structural and sociocultural hurdles that prevent them from fully participating in economic and social sectors. These gaps are more prominent in rural communities, where traditional values, limited educational opportunities, and economic dependence further marginalize women. In this context, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) became known as a strategic tool for reducing gender disparities. Section 135 of the Companies Act 2013 makes India the first country to mandate CSR spending, mandating eligible companies to devote at least 2% of their average net income to social development projects. Gender equality and women's empowerment have gained popularity among accepted CSR spending categories, with firms implementing specialized programs to improve women's skills, financial literacy, healthcare access, and entrepreneurial capacities.

Despite the growing number of CSR projects focused at empowering women, there is still an absence of detailed evaluation of their true impact. Existing research frequently focuses on isolated case studies or broad CSR trends, rather than methodically evaluating how these programs contribute to long-term gender equality. Furthermore, the effectiveness of initiatives involving CSR varies significantly by region due to differences in cultural norms, resource availability, and community engagement. This study seeks to bridge this research gap by critically examining the function of CSR in promoting women's empowerment in India. It seeks to identify major corporate initiatives, assess their socioeconomic impacts, and investigate the problems encountered throughout their execution. By examining both rural and urban environments, the study offers a comprehensive perspective of how CSR can act as an engine for inclusive growth. The findings are likely to help policymakers, corporate executives, and development practitioners construct more effective, context-sensitive CSR programs that line with national gender equity goals and contribute significantly to the larger agenda of sustainable development.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To examine how well CSR programs support Gender equality in India.
- List the main CSR initiatives that support gender equality.
- Evaluate the socioeconomic effects on women of CSR efforts.
- Evaluate the barriers to CSR programs' effective execution.
- Make recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of CSR programs.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

- Ramar, P. (2024). Impact of Corporate Social Responsibility Initiatives on Women's Empowerment in India published in *CompFin Research: Corporate Social Responsibility* (CSR) initiatives are emerging as effective tools for addressing gender equality and women's empowerment, especially in India, where socio-economic disparities persist. This study examines the impact of CSR programs on empowering women through literature reviews, case studies, and empirical analysis. It evaluates how CSR strategies enhance economic opportunities, promote inclusion, and tackle implementation challenges across diverse sectors. By critically assessing outcomes, the research contributes valuable insights into leveraging CSR for sustainable gender equality and socio-economic development.
- Das, H. (2024). Critically Examining the Role of CSR Initiatives by Corporations in the Economic Independence of Women in Rural Areas published in *Lloyd Business Review*. The study critically explores how CSR initiatives by five Indian corporations contribute to rural women's economic empowerment. Using secondary data and case studies, it highlights strategies like skill development, micro-credit, and mentorship, while identifying barriers such as cultural norms and poor evaluation. It advocates for context-sensitive, collaborative approaches to enhance CSR impact and sustainability.
- Rajawat, A., & Shukla, K. (2024). The Role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Initiatives in Promoting Women Empowerment in India published in *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*: This study examines the impact of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives on women's socio-economic status and empowerment across various regions and sectors. Through primary data analysis, it identifies key CSR strategies that drive women's economic progress and personal growth, while addressing obstacles faced by organizations. The findings highlight the need for tailored interventions to maximize CSR's positive influence, emphasizing a multi-faceted approach to overcome structural barriers and promote gender equality. By showcasing best practices, the study underscores the role of CSR in fostering sustainable societal and economic development, advancing women's empowerment, and contributing to organizational success.
- The literature on CSR and women's empowerment in India can be organized into five key themes. First, CSR initiatives promote economic empowerment by enhancing income opportunities. Second, they focus on skill development and livelihood creation through vocational training and self-help groups. Third, digital inclusion and financial literacy enable women to access modern tools and resources.

Fourth, studies highlight implementation and monitoring challenges, including cultural barriers and weak evaluation systems. Lastly, policy and institutional frameworks shape CSR effectiveness through legal mandates and partnerships. These themes align closely with the study's objectives and underscore CSR's transformative potential.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design, integrating document analysis and case study methods to assess CSR's impact on women's empowerment.

Sampling Method: Purposive sampling was used to select CSR initiatives with a clear gender focus, such as Project Shakti (HUL), Okhai (Tata Motors), and ITC-WOW. Selection criteria included program longevity, scale, and documented outcomes.

Data Collection Tools:

- Secondary data from the National CSR Portal, Gender Gap Report 2024, and corporate CSR disclosures.
- Case documentation and impact reports from implementing agencies.

Analytical Techniques:

- Thematic Content Analysis to identify recurring patterns in CSR strategies and outcomes.
- Comparative Case Analysis to contrast rural vs. urban program effectiveness.
- Trend Analysis of CSR spending on women's empowerment (2016–2023).

This methodology incorporates both quantitative trends and qualitative observations, allowing for a deeper understanding of the gendered impact of CSR. Additionally, it takes reactions from stakeholders and regional variety into account.

CSR FRAMEWORK: OVERVIEW

India is a global leader in enforcing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as specified in Section 135 of the Companies Act, 2013, which took effect on April 1, 2014. This landmark legislation mandates that companies having a net worth of ₹500 crore or more, a turnover of ₹1,000 crore or more, or a net profit of ₹5 crore or more must allocate a minimum of 2% of their average net earnings from the preceding three financial years to CSR initiatives. Originally optional, CSR has now become a legal requirement, demonstrating India's dedication to sustainable development.

Corporations may execute CSR efforts via registered trusts, societies, or Section 8 businesses, contingent upon plans sanctioned by their CSR committees. Non-compliance requires an explanation in the board's report, however sanctions are restricted. Significantly, CSR regulations apply to foreign enterprises operating in India, guaranteeing a wide-ranging effect.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives span various domains, including poverty alleviation, education, healthcare, sanitation, rural development, gender equality, and environmental conservation. Regulatory amendments now require CSR implementing agencies to register with the Ministry of Corporate Affairs, thereby improving openness and accountability.

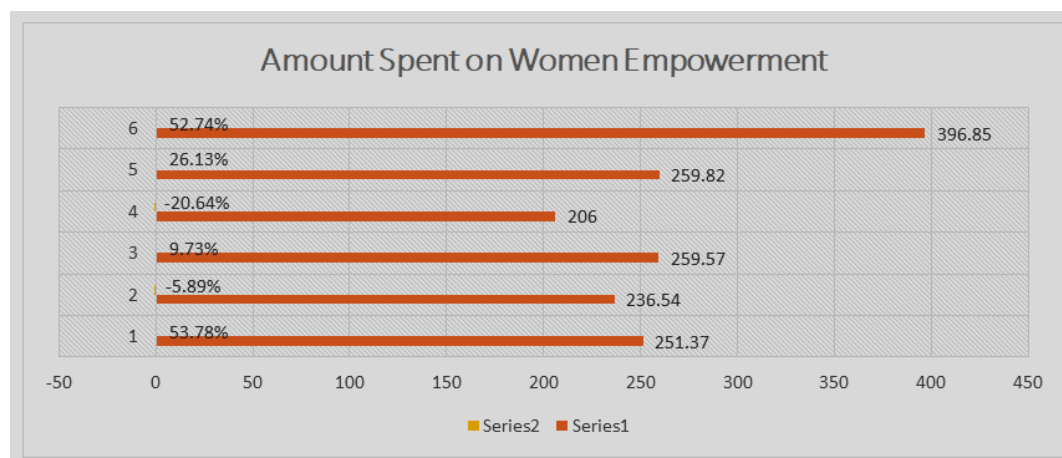
These initiatives have encouraged transformative undertakings, promoting an inclusive economy and furthering sustainability objectives. In conjunction with governmental initiatives, business contributions are essential to India's comprehensive development, addressing socio-economic issues and creating significant change.

CSR SPENDING BY CORPORATES ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT & TOP INITIATIVES FOR PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY

Amount Spent on Women Empowerment activities through CSR

Year	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
INR Cr.	163.46	251.37	236.54	259.57	206	259.82	396.85
Year-on-year growth		53.78%	-5.89%	9.73%	-20.64%	26.13%	52.74%

Source: National CSR Portal



CSR Initiatives Aimed at Economically Empowering Women and Promoting Gender Equality

Name of Corporate	Project Name	Details
Hindustan Unilever Limited	Project Shakti	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ This program helps rural women in India gain financial independence and entrepreneurial skills. ❖ The company trains female micro-entrepreneurs called Shakti Ammas to work as independent distributors.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Rural Sales Promotion trainers help these company owners hone their management abilities by offering advice in areas such as bookkeeping, marketing, and sales. ❖ More than 1,60,000 Shakti Ammas are in operation throughout 18 states at the moment, and an additional 25,000 are planned to be added every two years.
Tata Motors and Samaj Vikas Kendra (SVK)	Okhai	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Training women in needlework and other stitching crafts is a way to empower them in rural areas, and this program is working in tandem with the Okhai initiative, which was started by the Tata Chemicals Society for Rural Development. ❖ Okhai is a worldwide internet marketplace where these ladies sell their one-of-a-kind handicrafts. ❖ Okhai provides the designs and materials, and the women make the finished goods. ❖ More than 400 women have received training through this program, allowing them to establish themselves financially and find stable employment. ❖ Artisans can make anything from 500 to 11,000 rupees per month, depending on their skill level and the number of hours they labour. ❖ The initiative has improved the lives of 470 families and has helped the community as a whole.
ITC	Project: Women's Economic Empowerment Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ To encourage mutual aid and teamwork among residents, self-help groups should be established. ❖ Making sure women have access to micro-credit and other forms of financial aid to meet their requirements. ❖ Assistance for women farmers and businesses run by women to help them make a living.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Providing rural women with digital literacy and practical training in tailoring, beauty care, and entrepreneurship is the goal of the ITC-WOW (Women's Office on Wheels) initiative. ❖ With more expansion in the works, the program's focus on women's economic empowerment, skill development, education, and healthcare access has resulted in the creation of almost 112,800 sustainable livelihood options.
HDFC Bank	Sustainable Livelihood Initiative (SLI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Financial Literacy and Livelihood Training Initiative ❖ Empowers women in rural areas through financial literacy and livelihood training. ❖ Provides credit counselling for developing banking habits. ❖ Facilitates credit services for entrepreneurial and agricultural activities. ❖ Ensures no processing, closure, or pre-closure charges. ❖ Offers insurance services to mitigate risks. ❖ Operates in 20,000 villages across 27 states. ❖ Provides sustainable livelihoods to over 71 lakh women.

IMPACT OF CSR ACTIVITIES DONE BY CORPORATES

In India, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities have developed into an important platform for empowering women, especially in rural regions, by promoting entrepreneurship and job prospects. These programs are executed directly by corporations or indirectly via collaborations with NGOs and other entities. They seek to provide sustainable livelihoods for women in several industries, including marketing, packaging, food processing, handicrafts, textiles, agriculture, and entrepreneurship. The subsequent elements underscore the significance of CSR in enhancing women's empowerment:

- **Skill Development and Training:** CSR initiatives highlight the provision of critical abilities to women through training in product development, machinery operation, marketing, sales, accounting, entrepreneurship, and communication.

These competencies enhance productivity and equip women with the ability to overcome job difficulties.

- **Establishment of Self-Help Groups (SHGs):** SHGs are created through CSR activities to unite women from marginalised communities, promoting self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship. Corporations offer education, training, and financial support to Self-Help Group members, promoting economic development and sustainable livelihoods.
- **Mentorship and Networking:** CSR initiatives provide mentorship to women entrepreneurs, linking them with industry experts, advisory entities, suppliers, and distributors. Digital and physical platforms provide cooperation, knowledge exchange, and enhanced networking opportunities.
- **Employment and Placement Opportunities:** Trained women are integrated into corporate environments or linked with various organisations and employment agencies, guaranteeing a consistent revenue stream and professional advancement.
- **Access to Micro-Credit and Financing:** CSR activities inform women about financial resources, such as rural and agricultural credit, low-interest loans, and flexible repayment choices, thereby facilitating financial independence.
- **Technological and Digital Literacy:** Instruction in e-commerce, digital payments, online marketing, and social networking enables women to expand their enterprises and attain employment prospects commensurate with their skills.

Recent data indicates a 13% rise in CSR expenditure for 2022-23, totalling ₹29,988 crore, with education and healthcare collectively receiving nearly ₹16,800 crore. These efforts have substantially advanced women's empowerment, promoting financial autonomy and sustainable development. Nonetheless, obstacles in execution remain, necessitating improved openness and oversight to optimise effectiveness. Notwithstanding these obstacles, CSR programs remain essential in mitigating socio-economic inequalities and fostering inclusive growth. (Source: National CSR Portal)

CHALLENGES TO EFFECTIVE CSR IMPLEMENTATION IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT ACTIVITIES IN INDIA

The challenges that both urban and rural regions face when trying to implement corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives to empower women are very different. Traditional practices and a lack of resources are common causes of problems in rural areas, but problems in cities are distinct and call for innovative solutions.

- **Long-Established Gender Roles:** Women in rural regions are still expected to stay at home and take care of the household, which limits their opportunities for

education and financial independence. Even in more progressive urban locations, women still face gender bias, income inequality, and a lack of leadership chances.

- **Cultural Sensitivity:** In rural areas, corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects frequently fail because people involved have no understanding of the local customs and dynamics. Due to the high cultural diversity in urban areas, it is necessary to apply simplicity in order to avoid offending anyone group.
- **Assessing Needs:** Women in urban areas may benefit from advanced training, mentorship, and professional advancement chances, whereas women in rural areas typically need assistance with basic skill development and gaining access to resources. Effective CSR programs will address these specific problems.
- **Community Engagement:** Collaborating with local organisations, educational institutions, and professional networks is beneficial for urban programs, while grassroots-level involvement is necessary for rural assignments to create trust.
- **Techniques for Tracking Progress:** Both scenarios suffer from inadequate evaluation tools, which impede CSR initiatives. Particularly for urban initiatives, reliable methods of impact measurement and strategy adaptation to changing settings are essential.

Actions have been made in resolving these difficulties by recent CSR initiatives. For example, "Project Shakti" by Hindustan Unilever encourages women in rural areas to start their own businesses, and "BridgeIT" by Tata Consultancy Services helps women in urban areas become more proficient users of technology. In a variety of environments, these initiatives show how CSR may help close economic inequities and give women more agency. Corporations may promote inclusive growth and secure long-term opportunities for women in urban and rural regions by removing these challenges.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CSR PROGRAMS

Detailed examination into regional customs, traditions, beliefs, and social structures should be the first step for corporations looking to carry out effective Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) projects. To successfully identify the needs and objectives of local communities, it is vital to engage with them directly, especially rural women. It is recommended to start with awareness campaigns before implementing significant CSR activities. In order to create an atmosphere that is favourable to women's empowerment, these campaigns might emphasise the significance of women's education, employment, financial independence, and self-sufficiency.

The reach and effectiveness of corporate social responsibility efforts can be greatly enhanced through collaboration with NGOs, government agencies, and other groups that have a strong presence in rural areas. By working together, they can better understand the struggles of women and find ways to support them. Working together in this way guarantees that CSR plans take into account the specific requirements of the target audience and are thus well-informed.

Achieving meaningful outcomes is possible when corporations adapt their implementation strategies based on research conducted at the grassroots level and collaboration with stakeholders. It is clear from recent CSR trends that well-planned programs promoting financial inclusion, skill development, and education have become increasingly popular. With careful preparation and implementation, these programs have the ability to close economic gaps, empower women in both rural & urban areas, and help build a more equitable and sustainable future.

6. CONCLUSION

Women in India make up just 27% of the workforce and earn only 18% of the country's labour income, according to the Gender Gap Report 2022. This indicates that gender inequality is still a problem in the country. The gender gap is still very wide in areas like education, work, and financial independence, even though there are constitutional provisions that prohibit discrimination based on gender. One revolutionary tool that is beginning to emerge as a means to tackle these inequalities in society is corporate social responsibility (CSR). Opportunities for women in fields such as agriculture, marketing, and textiles are increased by CSR programs that offer them skills training, micro-credit, mentorship, and job placement services. CSR initiatives with the objective to empower women and close the gender gap. But there are still obstacles, such as rural women's limited education and financial options due to traditional gender norms and metropolitan women's discrimination in remuneration leadership roles, and workplace dynamics. In order to make CSR programs more impactful, companies should concentrate on research at the grassroots level, encourage inclusive stakeholder participation, and work with local groups, government agencies, and NGOs.

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