



Women Empowerment and its Challenges in Kerala-India: A Perspective of Madzhab al-Shafi'I Islamic Teachings

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the perspective of Madzhab al-Shafi'i's Islamic teachings on the challenges of women's empowerment in Kerala, India. It discusses the current socio-economic and legal issues affecting women's empowerment, and the impact of traditional gender roles and cultural norms on this progress. The study employs both qualitative and quantitative methods to review related literature and identify the various legal and cultural barriers women in Kerala face in their quest for equal rights and opportunities. Additionally, it includes semi-structured interviews with prominent Islamic scholars, women professionals, and government officials to analyze how Madzhab al-Shafi'i's teachings could address these challenges. The findings indicate that Madzhab al-Shafi'i's teachings have significant potential to transform Kerala's culture of inequality. Furthermore, these teachings could help bridge the gender gap by promoting mutual respect and understanding. In conclusion, the paper offers valuable insights into the dynamics of gender justice in Kerala and the potential of Madzhab al-Shafi'i's teachings to foster a more equal and just society. It suggests that Madzhab al-Shafi'i's writings should be considered when developing strategies to promote and sustain women's empowerment in such contexts.

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1. Introduction

The Shafi'i school of thought is one of Sunni Islam's four major schools of Islamic jurisprudence. It was founded by the Muslim scholar and jurist, who was considered the father of Muslim jurisprudence in the early 9th century. As the other schools of Islamic thought, al-Shafi'i relies on the Qur'an and the Sunnah as primary sources of law; he also affirms the authority of both divine law-

giving (the Qur'ān and the Sunnah) and human speculation regarding the law where passages of Qur'ān and/or the Ḥadīths are ambiguous, the school seeks the guidance of *Qiyās* (analogical reasoning), and also the *Ijmā'* (consensus of scholars or the community) was "accepted but not stressed." He believes that women are valued, respected, supported, and protected above all others in the community, and they are the world's decorations [1], [2].

As he emphasized in most of his writings on the importance of women's recognition, Imam al-Shafi'i supported the view of empowering people in general and women in particular for the betterment of the Ummah. In our contemporary life today, women's empowerment has held a pivotal role in the advancement and evolution of societies from the yesteryears. It encompasses the concept of affording women the capability and avenues to exercise their autonomy and judgment in shaping their own lives, thereby facilitating the realization of their complete potential. For Women's economic sustainability, empowerment is a core concept for progress and dependency. It centres on equipping women with the means, opportunities, and autonomy to shape their destinies, unleash their potential, and enhance their society [3].

Women's educational, economic, and social empowerment is a prerequisite for sustainable development, pro-poor growth, and the achievement of all the SDGs, and it is about rights and equitable societies. It has become fashionable, which essentially means decentralization of authority and power that aims at getting the participation of deprived sections of people in the decision-making process or giving voice to the voiceless. The goal of empowerment may be a threefold revolution: to change people's hearts, to create a change in their lives, and to change the social structure of their citizens [4], [5]. Women perform 66% of the world's work and produce 50% of the food, yet earn only 10% of the income and own 1% of the property. Whether the issue is improving education in the developing world, fighting global climate change, or addressing nearly any other challenge, empowering women is a critical part of the equation [6].

Empowering women through education, finances, and jobs is one major step to allowing women in India to lead. However, the most impressive step toward positive change has been taken through the region's governing practices and politics. In 2010, Kerala became the first state in India to reserve 50 percent of its seats for women in local and state government. According to the Kudumbashree Organization report in 2020, which focused on the women empowerment project in India, about 85 percent of the women involved in local government have attained leadership skills from their involvement with the organization [7].

It is the normal desire of people who feel powerless to have more control over their lives. The feeling of powerlessness varies across human perceptions and happens in many ways. Some feel that their lives are ruled by forces over which they have no control and which are too powerful for them, and some also feel that their lives are ruled by forces that are far away and which they cannot identify. All this powerlessness causes fear that their lives might be crushed, destroyed, or reduced in time, and it kills the human spirit [4].

The feeling of powerlessness is very strong in the poor or less concerned gender. Because of their daily struggle for survival against strong economic and social forces, the poor constantly feel disempowered, and because of their blockage or restriction in responsibility participation, women are considered inactive and incapacitated in several responsibilities. This vice is increased in the case of women, who face not only external economic and social forces but also within the household in the state of Kerala, India [4].

Powerlessness does not exist in one sphere alone; it affects other spheres of human life and is also a form of vulnerability. Overcoming powerlessness and building empowerment also occur in all spheres. Economic empowerment is when people begin controlling their economic processes and gaining access to resources, skills, and markets, leading to social and political empowerment. Women's empowerment may mean equal status, opportunity, and freedom to develop them. It would mean equipping women to be economically independent and self-reliant, to have positive self-esteem, to enable them to face any difficult situations, and to be able to participate in the process of decision-making [8]. Therefore, it is true that "Women have a history; women are in history," as testified by

Gerda Lerner, an American pioneer in the field of women's history, became a manifesto. What emerged was a new way of thinking about gender; instead of accepting feminine identity as natural and essential, historians and other social scientists treated it as constructed. This liberating hypothesis simulated questions about the empowerment of women.

2. Method

The study employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative research approaches in a novel way to comprehend the current situation of women's empowerment and the various legal and cultural barriers that women in Kerala, India, face in their efforts to gain equal rights and opportunities. Semi-structured interviews with pertinent people were also chosen to analyze how Madzhab al-Shafi's Islamic teachings could address the challenge in the study area. A review and analysis of relevant literature from primary and secondary sources of data was maintained to gather more data and analyze the process due to their validity and usefulness in exploring participants' experiences and viewpoints. The participants in the interview were the Women Students Association, the Women Teachers Association, representatives from community leaders, representatives from government officials, and representatives from religious scholars. The participants were coded as WSA, WTA, RCL, RGO, and RRS.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Concept of Gender

Today, the concepts of 'sex' and 'gender' are commonly used to refer respectively to the biological and the social aspects of being a man or a woman. Gender as a concept and usage among policymakers, planners, and the general public has been appreciably misconstrued. Most times, when the word gender is used, people immediately suppose that reference is being made to women and their affairs, and vice versa [9].

Gender studies, as an academic field, delves into the intricate roles, experiences, and influences of gender within society. It is dedicated to unraveling the social and cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity, examining the power dynamics associated with gender, and exploring the intersectionality of gender with other defining social categories [10].

Gender studies' meaning lies in their critical analysis of how gender shapes personal identities, influences social structures, and molds cultural norms. The concept of gender studies extends beyond merely challenging traditional notions of gender and sex; it actively critiques and seeks to redefine our understanding of these concepts. In doing so, gender studies play a pivotal role in questioning and reshaping the societal narratives that have long governed gender roles [11].

In the context of gender studies in India, the field takes on a unique dimension, reflecting the country's diverse cultural tapestry and complex social hierarchies. Indian gender studies often focus on the intersection of gender with caste, religion, and economic status, providing a more nuanced understanding of the gendered experiences within the sub-continent [12].

Therefore, gender refers to socially constructed roles, socially learned behaviors, and expectations associated with males and females. It is clear that women and men are biologically different, but all cultures interpret and elaborate on these inherent biological differences into a set of social expectations about what behaviors and activities are appropriate for them and what rights, resources, and even power they possess. Based on the above situation, gender inequality arises when there is no equality of access or opportunity for both males and females. To this end, "bridging the gender gap" in empowerment involves not simply enrolling more girls in school but also ensuring non-discriminatory public participation and guaranteeing them equitable chances of success in all fields of life.

3.2. Brief Discourse on Kerala India

Kerala has been one Indian state that defied national trends and provided a model of development that is more open and inclusive of women. Flanked by the Arabian Sea in the West, the towering Western Ghats in the East, and networked by 44 interconnected rivers, Kerala is blessed with a unique set of geographical features that have made it one of Asia's most sought-after tourist destinations. A long shoreline with serene beaches, tranquil stretches of emerald backwaters, lush hill stations, and exotic wildlife are just a few of the wonders that await you once you cross to the other side [13]. Being the most literate and progressive state, Kerala owes much to women. The state is hailed everywhere for its human development indices, progress, women's empowerment, transgender policy, etc.

Kerala prides itself on being the flag bearer for how a culture can respect its past and march forward with growth and progress. One hundred percent literacy, world-class health care systems, India's lowest infant mortality rate, and the highest life expectancy rates are among the milestones that the people of the state are extremely proud of. Kerala is a state located on the Malabar Coast of south-west India [14]. The state covers an area of 38,863 square kilometers with 31,838,619 inhabitants. The state of Kerala shares its border with Karnataka and Tamil Nadu [13].

Malayalam is the most widely used and official language of the state. Other languages that are used here are Tamil and English. The state has a quality of life in the county with excellent physical infrastructure and a 90.9% literacy level. Thus, historically, too, a favorable ground was set for Kerala women, while most of the Indian states were deplorably poor in this regard. Perhaps this paved the way for Kerala's outstanding achievement in terms of women's development and, as a result, an increase in overall human development. As per the 2010 Economic Review, Kerala's female literacy is 92 percent, while the corresponding figure at the national level is only 65 percent [15]. As per the latest available secondary source, the female life expectancy in Kerala is 76.3 years, while the same for women at the national level is only 64.2 years [16].

Kerala has had a unique development story, and the revolution has been rightly termed the 'Kerala model of development.' This model is highly paradoxical because the state's economic development has been unimpressive while there has been major development on the social indicators front. This kind of lopsided growth is the first of its kind, which is why it has been of interest [8].

The expansion of education in Kerala can be largely attributed to the initiatives of the rulers of kingdoms like Travancore and Cochin, which were the main provinces of the British Empire. Rulers like Rani, Gouri, and Parvathi Bai, who was the ruling queen of Travancore in 1817, made it clear as early as then that the state should provide education to all by defraying the cost of education. She believed that education would help in the spread of enlightenment, which would, in turn, help produce better subjects and public servants. This would ultimately help in the advancement of the reputation and prosperity of the state [17].

3.3. Status of Women in Kerala Society

Women occupy half of the world's population. But they are a historically oppressed and marginalized section in almost all societies. Normally, their position is considered inferior to that of their male counterparts. They are considered the weakest sections, mainly because of their biological differences. They had to fight for their rights, which comprised basic human rights, economic rights, and political rights [17].

The condition of women is not much different in India as well; continuous struggles characterize their lives. Being a part of India, the state of Kerala is no exception. According to most authorities, a woman was always a minor at law and was always under the tutelage of someone [18].

To justify this, according to Shafi'i scholars, a childhood female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her guardian is dead to her sons, a woman must never be independent. Aravind (2019) clearly mentions that women occupied a higher status in the then-society of Kerala; they enjoyed considerable freedom [8]. At the same time, it was a patriarchal

society in which the birth of a son was considered important, and the duty of a wife was primarily to satisfy her husband. But in later times, they succeeded in providing ample space for women; they had the full right to take part in religious ceremonies; no religious rite or ritual could be complete without the presence of women; they even had the right to choose their husbands; and child marriage was not in vogue [18].

It is presumed that the status of women began to decline by the later Vedic period when the birth of a female child was considered a sin, child marriage became common, and widows were prohibited from remarriage. The interview respondents asserted that:

A representative from the Women Teachers Association during the interview attested that:

“They were not allowed to take part in religious ceremonies as well. This kind of change in attitude towards women started affecting the general community as well as weakening the standard of women and their role in the private and public sectors (WTA).”

Another representative from Women Students Associations during the interview attested that:

“In a country like India, where several goddesses are worshipped, it is pitiful to see that women are treated with lesser status than men, and even a slew of reforms post-independence have not been able to pull women out of their repressed, marginalized, and exploited state (WSA).”

Kerala society is widely considered matrilineal. In the caste society of Kerala, many communities followed matrilineal order by and large in the past, and a few followed patriarchal orders. The matrilineal order allowed property rights for women but not control over them. The control of the family and property was vested with the male head of the family. Slowly and steadily, the matrilineal joint families were transformed into breadwinners. The three main religions of Kerala are Hindu, Christian, and Muslim, which decisively determine the position of women in Kerala society. Women's place in society is defined in terms of traditional affiliations and belief patterns [18].

3.4. Position of women in the families of Kerala Community

In the Kerala family structure, roles and responsibilities are allotted on the basis of gender; they have to take up the roles of wives and mothers in their respective homes, and their prime responsibilities are bearing and rearing children and taking care of household duties, which are not considered productive. The sexual division of labor is naturalized through a broad range of social, cultural, and religious discourse, and family ideology has great significance in constructing gender differences. Kerala society is one in which a series of socio-political developments have taken place, and women have contributed to these to a large extent [16].

The women of Kerala have some unique features compared to their counterparts in other states. Kerala is the only state in which women dominate men in number. The female literacy rate in Kerala (86.13) is also above the national rate (39.29). These peculiar characteristics have contributed favorably to the consciousness of Kerala women regarding their existence, rights, and work situations. On the entrepreneurial front, the number of women entrepreneurs has been steadily increasing, and their visibility is really felt in the state economy. They have attracted the attention of policymakers as well as agencies in the state [19].

3.5. Imam Al-Shafi'i and the concept of a woman

3.5.1. His Lineage

Born in Asqalan, a city in Gaza, Palestine, the cleric Abu Abdillah Muhammad bin Idris bin Abbas bin Usman bin Shafi'i bin Saib bin Ubaid bin Yazid bin Hashim bin Abdul Muṭalib bin Abdul Manaf bin Qushai al-Quraish. His birth and Imam Abu Hanifa's deaths occurred at the same time. Because Imam Shafi'i's fifth grandfather, Saib bin Yazid, was a friend of the Prophet and descended

from the Prophet's family from Bani Hashim, Imam Shafi'i was a deserving descendant of *Ahlu al-Bait*. Even though he came from a noble family, luck was not on his side. In the Yemeni immigrant settlement, Imam Shafi'i was born into a low-income family [20]. It is quite probable that Imam Shafi'i's upbringing as a poor immigrant led to a deeper and more perceptive grasp of the hierarchical social backdrop and his realization that it also impacted religious life, including marriage. He acknowledged that there is a cultural imbalance in society between different groups, which could lead to marital culture shock [21].

Mum of Imam Shafi'i took him to Makkah because she was worried about the noble blood. There, he was able to commit the Qur'an and the Prophet's hadiths to memory. The Prophet's Hadith trail was still very strong in the Hijaz. He lived in the village of Bani Huzail and studied the ancient poems of the Arabs, which possibly helped shape Imam Shafi'i's understanding of various incompatibilities in society while forming his contextual reasoning. This is clearly seen in *al-Qaul's* discourse [22].

Al-Qaul is the professional opinion of Imam Shafi'i as a jurist. This opinion, even when Imam Shafi'i was alive, differed depending on changes in the context of space and time. The difference is referred to as *al-Qaul al-Qadīm and al-Qaul al-Jadīd*. *Al-Qaul al-Qadīm* is covered in his book called *al-Hujjah*, written by him when he was in Iraq, while *al-Qaul al-Jadīd* is in his book titled *al-Umm*, written by him when he was in Egypt (al-Shai'i, 1993). The new situation, location, and time a mujtahid faces also influence his professional opinions [20].

The difference between *al-Qaul al-Qadīm and al-Qaul al-Jadīd* in Shafi'i schools is similar (although not absolute) to that applied in *nāsikh mansūkh* in the rules of interpretation (Rashidi et al., 2018).

This clearly illustrates that the existence of “old” and “new” discourse in the world of Imam Shafi'i thoughts experiences strong dynamics, which also influence the conception of many concepts, including women and their empowerment.

3.5.2. His View on the Concept of Woman

According to Imam al-Shafi'i, women in Islam are accorded the highest honor and are given a distinct status. Women's status is elevated in this particular regard, and their unique place is on the ideal view throughout human history [23]. The advent of Islam changed the situation because it outlawed the *jahiliyyah* practice of treating women as property, even going so far as to degrade and equate them with animals [24].

One of the most well-known Imams of the Madhabi school of *fiqh*, Imam al-Shafi'i, wrote a number of works encompassing various disciplines, including hadith, *tasawwuf*, *fiqh*, and *aqidah*. One of his best-known compositions is *al-Diwan al-Shafi'i*, which is a collection of poetry he recited on the spot while instructing [25].

Numerous poems by him address issues and polemics of the society of his day, as well as the topics of women's affairs, either directly or indirectly. Imam al-Shafi'i asserts that women should be protected with love since they are men's responsibility. For this life duty to be carried out successfully, a person must genuinely feel love for this obligation [24].

The following refutation by Imam al-Shafi'i fully aligns with the Prophet Muhammad's hadiths as reported by Muslims:

“Be conscious of Allah pertaining to women's affairs. Indeed, you took them with Allah's mandate upon you, and it is permissible for you to do so in their private parts by God's affirmation. Hence, the rights of them upon you are to give them sustenance and clothes in the way of *ma'ruf* (acceptable) (narrated by Muslim (no. 1218) Book al-Hajj, from Abu Hurairah RA).”

Imam al-Shafi'i attempted to convey to the community that women are valued above all others, placed in a lofty position, and are the world's decorations. But since obtaining Allah's blessing and

reaching the ideal place of return should be the primary goals of this life, humans should be aware of this fleeting pleasure.

3.6. Women's Empowerment from Islamic Perspectives

Islam places great emphasis on women's roles as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, and aunts. Effective parenting and education are important for daughters. In Islam, raising daughters well is highly valued. In Islam, husband and wife have equal rights and obligations to one another. However, the man is also responsible for providing financial security for his family and is not permitted to use his wife's assets or money without her consent [26].

Islam values women highly when they are mothers. It is imperative that you always obey her, show her respect, and be kind to her. According to Islamic belief, heaven is right at a mother's feet. And by giving their mothers the utmost care and attention possible, everyone should strive to enter paradise. It is forbidden in Islam to disobey one's mother. Furthermore, one must never harm one's mother. The mother has greater rights than the father; as she ages and becomes less strong, it becomes more of your duty to look after her. Islam also respects women in the roles of aunt and sister [27].

It is abundantly evident that Islam offers women a sense of security throughout every stage of life; among their homes, they are regarded as queens. This demonstrates the extent to which Islam, as a legitimate religion, seeks to uphold and defend women with an abundance of love, respect, and affection that gives them a great sense of security and well-being. While male family members are expected to care for females at every stage of their lives, they are not left on their own to work hard to meet their fundamental necessities [20].

In real life, some people misunderstand the information above and have false beliefs about Islam, believing that women are not free spirits and that the religion has placed many restrictions on them. However, have we ever tried to learn the true story behind the so-called female freedom that most people support? A woman's freedom and independence should not be mistaken for the sexy, eye-catching, dangerous, complex, restless, depressed, and compromised lifestyle that the modern world has made popular. The foundation for women's empowerment must be solid, deeply ingrained, and unaffected by fads and trends. Furthermore, women's self-respect should always be upheld, regardless of the century we live in [28]. Some of the interview respondents stated that:

A representative from Religious Scholars during the interview attested that:

“From the first day that Islam existed as a religion until the final day, every facet of human life is covered in detail in the book of Islam, known as the Qur'an, which came into being some 1400 years ago. It is advised that Muslims use the lessons in this book to have prosperous lives. The status and rights of women are undoubtedly mentioned in this holy book, the Qur'an. In the continuous discussion about women's status and role in society, Islam and secularism have made women's empowerment one of their main points of contention (RRS).”

The greatest example of female entrepreneurship and empowerment in Islam is Khadija (may Allah be pleased with her), the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). Additionally, she was married three times—the first two having expired and leaving her with little children, their business, and their possessions—when she married the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). She decided to remarry Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) to care for her business, her children, and her future. Additionally, she was crucial in helping the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) in his efforts to propagate Islam. Prophet Mohammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) was younger than Khadija (may Allah be pleased with her) at the time of their marriage. This is also a stunning illustration of women's emancipation and freedom in Islam, which dates back to only about 1400 years ago [29].

A representative from the Women Teachers Association during the interview attested that:

“As is well known, women are not traditionally assigned the role of head of the household in Islam. As long as there is a male accessible, Islam has spared women from the struggles of daily life. The sacred text, the Quran, provides us with guidance on leading a prosperous life, and all of its teachings must be adhered to by Muslims worldwide (WTA).”

Males and females can be equal even in the eyes of scientists, but they cannot be the same on a biological, physical, psychological, or emotional level because of differences in their respective physiologies. Islam, therefore, acknowledges diverse scientific viewpoints and bases its fundamental ideas on these individual variances [30].

A representative from community leaders during the interview attested that:

“It is not accurate to believe that this will make women perpetually reliant on their families rather than empowering them, preserving their self-respect, and shielding them from harm. It is a known fact that some individuals mistreat women when they see them by themselves, outside of their homes, without the presence of family. Rape rates are extremely high worldwide as a result of this, and Islam offers its adherents tangible solutions to the problems that women are expected to face daily (RCL).”

Allah did not distinguish between men and women in the Qur'an's general activities. Instead, it says that men and women are on an equal footing and part of the same species. In the hereafter, Allah makes it abundantly clear that all people, male or female, will be rewarded for their good deeds. He says,

“Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has Faith, verily, to him will We give a new Life, a good and pure life, and We will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions.” (16:97)

And their Lord has accepted of them, and answered them:

“Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, be the male or female: You are members, one of another.” (3:195)

Alongside men, women were expected to perform tasks of *Amr bi al-ma'ruf and nahy 'an al-munkar* (enjoining virtue and forbidding vice), a political obligation allocated to both men and women. This is because people in positions of power and authority are primarily able to execute this job efficiently [31].

The Believers, men and women, are *awliya'* (protectors/guardians) of one another:

“They enjoin what is just and forbid what is evil: they observe regular prayers, practice regular charity, and obey Allah and His Messenger. Allah will pour His mercy on them: Allah is Exalted in power, Wise.” (9:71)

“You are indeed the best community (Ummah) that has ever been brought forth evolved for [the good of] mankind (an-nas). You enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and you believe in Allah . . .” (3:110).

These Qur'anic passages make it abundantly evident that Allah did not distinguish between men and women when it came to appointing the most significant task of encouraging good and prohibiting evil. Prominent Islamic scholar Muhammad Rashid Rida (d. 1935) stated that the Quran required both men and women to command virtues and forbid vices.

A representative from the Women Teachers Association during the interview attested that:

“There is no concrete evidence that repels women from work in Islam. In fact, if a Muslim woman wants to work, she can work in decent mode according to the rules and regulations of Islam. She has full Islamic permission to work and earn if there is no male member in the family to take care of her and her family (WSA).”

The rules and regulations are not meant to restrict the growth of females but to support and protect them from various difficult situations they may encounter. If she earns by following the

Islamic rules, she has the full right to spend her earned money according to her wishes, but she cannot be forced to work.

3.7. Progress in Empowering Women in Indian Communities

In order to empower women worldwide and provide equal opportunities and rights for them to participate in socio-cultural activities, politics, economics, education, defense, and security, as well as to be treated equally in the pursuit of development, the United Nations is working to improve the welfare of families and communities [32]. Thus, efforts must be made to coordinate equal opportunity and justice policies to promote cross-gender growth. Due to the continued underrepresentation of women in the sectors of education, health, social culture, politics, law, and the economy, women's quality of life is being negatively impacted [33]. Four power perspectives are covered in Manuere & Phiri's (2018) research to explain why women's empowerment is becoming increasingly important in today's world [34]. The issues of women's empowerment worldwide are explained and described using concepts relating to power, agency, resources, and accomplishments.

The low level of female participation in the education sector influences the low level of female empowerment and economic involvement. The limited chances that women have to work and try, together with their limited access to markets, technology, knowledge, and working capital, are examples of this [33].

More than sixty years after the constitutional guarantee of equality, many serious issues remain to be resolved. The formal global calls for the inclusion of women in national and international development began only in the early 1960s. However, Indian women were integrated as a special concern in the Indian development and planning process even before the formulation of India's first development plan (1951–1956). The Indian Constitution guarantees all its citizens justice, liberty, and equality. Recognizing the greater vulnerability of women, the Constitution makes special provisions for them. While prohibiting discrimination based on sex, Article 15(3) provides that nothing in the article shall prevent the state from making any special provision for women and children. Thus, the state has a constitutional basis for affirmative action in favor of women [19].

The constitutional mandate regarding women was reflected in the first five-year plan. It provided welfare measures for women, and a national body known as the Central Social Welfare Board was set up in 1953 to implement welfare programs for women. Simultaneously, the Community Development Movement was launched, which sought to mobilize women through a network of community-level women's groups known as 'Mahila Mandals.' These groups turned out to mobilize their peers on specific agendas and had limited value for the large mass of rural and urban poor women. Its impact was minimal on those most needing political representation and development assistance. The second five-year plan (1956–1961) was geared towards intensive agricultural development but failed to impact rural women and the poor in general. The third promoted women's education and reproductive health, and the fourth five-year plan focused on women's planning and mass education [35].

The approaches to women in each of the plans remain welfare-oriented and do not seek to address basic structural and cultural issues constraining women's roles, opportunities, and entitlements. The designation of 1975 as the International Women's Year and of 1976–1985 as the United Nations Decade for Women prompted a national plan of action for women to be adopted in 1976. This national plan was for intervention in health, family planning, null inflation, education, employment, legislation, and social welfare to improve the conditions of women. The Women's Welfare and Development Bureau was created in the Ministry of Social Welfare to act as a nodal point within the government to coordinate policies and programs and initiate measures for women's development [35].

The Fifth Five-Year Plan (1974–1979) especially emphasized women training through income generation and functional literacy programs intending to make women more productive on the public and the domestic front. This period witnessed the growth of many female groups working on various gender issues. The sixth and seventh five-year plans targeted women with the concepts of equity and empowerment propagated globally by the United Nations Decade for Women. It emphasized

interventions to empower women by generating awareness of their rights and privileges and training women for more productive economic activity. It also strived for continued support for improved access, control, and use of economic assets, services, and emerging technologies by women [35].

The global midterm evaluation of the women's decade opened the door to critical assessments of planned approaches to women's development in India. In 1985, a separate Department of Women and Child Development was created in the Human Resources Ministry to oversee the implementation of more than 27 different programs for women covering a range of services. The long-pending demand of women's organizations and NGO groups resulted in some action in 1988. The Department of Women and Child Development formulated a National Perspective Plan (NPP) for Women (1988–2000), which represents a long-term comprehensive policy for Indian women and a framework for integrating women into the country's development process [34].

A representative from government officials during the interview attested that:

“Contrary to what was intended, the persistent gap between development theory and practice in India has accentuated the burden of poverty and underdevelopment for women as well as for the less privileged. The present-day format of the process being pursued in the name of globalization, privatization, and liberalization is disempowering for the poor, downtrodden, and weaker sections of society, especially women. There is a need to analyze, from a gender perspective, policies and programs (RGO).”

It has become widely recognized and accepted that economic and social growth and development cannot be achieved in their true sense if we do not simultaneously concentrate on ensuring that every gender receives its mandate [36]. It has been noticed that, even on a global level, there is no country where women enjoy equal rights as men. This is shameful in the light of liberation and the global campaign on gender equality, where most Western ideologies kick against Islamic Shariah on women's rights. It is a widely accepted fact that women receive little or no help from the many societies in which they live. In most cases, they are denied the basic economic, social, and even legal rights their male counterparts enjoy [37].

Another representative from government officials during the interview attested that:

“Today, however, many governments and agencies concentrate on political empowerment. The political system in India as a country is democratic, unlike the social and economic systems. This means that the poor and socially backward people can gain access to power because of their large numbers, and in today's political system, this is happening (RGO).”

The political system empowers the most backward social classes and communities that have entered the mainstream of politics. At the same time, a process of decentralization is occurring in the political system as more power is being created at all levels, and women, too, are being drawn into the political power system. In the case of the economic system, as politics gets decentralized, economics gets centralized, and though the poor and the backward are gaining political power, they are losing economic power [38].

A representative from the Women Teachers Association during the interview attested that:

“The process of centralization is increasing with globalization, where international forces have begun to control markets at the local level. Today, it is necessary to build up economic empowerment without political or political empowerment without economic power, leading to much-distorted development (WTA).”

An important clarification must be made at this juncture is the meaning of the word empowerment. It has also been aptly pointed out that women's empowerment has been assumed to be possible by attempting to equalize opportunities in education, employment, and access to political power.

4. Conclusion

Empowering women is not just the right thing; it's crucial for making society better and more successful for everyone. By recognizing the need for women's empowerment and implementing strategies to promote it, we can create a world where women have the agency to shape their destinies, contribute to the betterment of society, and achieve their fullest potential. Empowered women are not just beneficiaries but active agents of positive change, and investing in their empowerment is an investment in a brighter future for all. Imam al-Shafi'i, an Islamic scholar, jurist, and founder of the Shafi'i school of thought, considers both males and females to be equals, where equality is mandated and granted by Allah SWT and also suggests their responsibilities and the best ways to live a successful life. All the basic things that are required for a woman to be empowered are completely incorporated into the religion of Islam, as well as in men. Imam al-Shafi'i affirmed that Islam is a religion that is complete in itself and has nothing missing in it; it takes care of every aspect of human life in general and has elevated the status of women in particular.

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