



Women in Leadership: Breaking the Barriers from Andarmahal to Public Leadership Roles

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Abstract

This paper examines the remarkable journey of women in India as they transition from the private, often secluded space of the andarmahal to active roles in public leadership and decision-making. By tracing historical milestones—including reform movements, the independence struggle, and the expansion of educational opportunities—the study reveals how women have continuously challenged and negotiated traditional gender barriers. Drawing from both historical context and contemporary examples, it highlights persistent inequalities while underscoring the resilience and agency of women across generations. The analysis demonstrates that women's leadership in India is an evolving, collective process shaped by determination and societal change. Ultimately, the study calls for supportive systems and inclusive policies to further empower women and ensure their equal participation in all spheres of public life.

Keywords: *Andarmahal, Women's Leadership, Gender Inequality, Empowerment, Education, Social Change, Public Participation.*

Introduction

The story of India's freedom struggle remains incomplete without acknowledging the significant yet often overlooked contributions made by women. This paper explores how women's roles evolved during this period and how their involvement not only supported the national struggle but also transformed their own social positions.

Women did not remain silent spectators. They actively participated in protests, built networks, spread nationalist ideas, and contributed to mass movements. Initially, their participation was restricted due to limited access to education and public life. Over time, however, awareness increased, and women from both urban and rural areas began to engage more actively.

Their movement into public spaces marked a significant shift. Stepping beyond traditional domestic roles, women began to assert themselves in social and political spheres. This transition—from dependence to agency—was gradual and required sustained effort. Today, women's growing presence in fields such as politics, science, sports, and business reflects both progress and the continued struggle for equality.

Need of the study

This paper tries to explore the transformation of women's roles in Indian history, particularly the shift from the private domain (andarmahal) to the public sphere (bahirmahal). Although this transition is widely acknowledged, there is a limited detailed understanding of how it unfolded across different time periods and social contexts.

Focusing on Indian women, with some reference to eastern India (women from Bengal), the study explores how access to education, employment, and political participation has evolved. It also examines how



enduring social structures such as patriarchy, caste hierarchy, and economic inequality continue to shape women's experiences despite visible progress.

By connecting historical developments with present realities, especially women's participation in the workforce and public life, the study aims to highlight both continuity and change. It aims to contribute to academic discussions and also policy thinking that promotes inclusive empowerment.

Review of literature

Studies on women's status in India have repeatedly highlighted how history, culture, and social structures have influenced gender expectations and identities. Early analyses argue that women's marginalization was deeply embedded within patriarchal systems that restricted their access to education, mobility, and participation in public life (Sarkar, 2001). The domestic sphere, often described as the *andarmahal*, functioned not only as a living space but also a social barrier that strengthened position in society. (Chatterjee, 1993).

During the 19th century, several social reform movements emerged to oppose customs like child marriage and supported women's education. These efforts created initial opportunities, though their benefits were mostly limited to certain social groups. (Forbes, 1996; Kumar, 1993).

With increased access to education, women gradually began to articulate their own experiences and question established social norms. This shift led to greater participation in reformist and educational initiatives, reflecting a transition from passive acceptance to active engagement (Forbes, 1996).

The freedom movement created new opportunities for women to step into public and political spaces. Yet, this participation did not necessarily bring lasting social change, as patriarchal attitudes continued to dominate the society. Cultural and ideological narratives were often used to legitimize women's participation, framing it within acceptable notions of femininity (Roy, 2012; Chatterjee, 1993). However, this inclusion was not always accompanied by long-term structural transformation, as patriarchal norms persisted. (Sarkar, 2001).

Post-independence literature shifted focus toward institutional developments and policy interventions-attention shifted to legal reforms and policies aimed at equality. Although laws improved women's rights, a gap between legal provisions and actual experiences persisted (Bagchi, 1995).

Recent research highlights the importance of intersectionality, showing how caste, class, and region influence women's opportunities. There is also increasing focus on the role of education, employment, and digital platforms in shaping women's empowerment.

Despite the expansion of research in this field, a gap remains in connecting historical developments with contemporary lived experiences across generations. Much of the existing literature focuses either on specific historical phases or on present-day issues in isolation. This study attempts to bridge that gap by integrating intergenerational perspectives with broader scholarly discussions, offering a more comprehensive understanding of women's evolving roles in Indian society.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative and exploratory approach to understand the shift in women's roles from the private to the public sphere. The study focuses on Indian women taken from participants in urban and semi-urban contexts.



A total of 20 participants were selected to represent different generations and socio-economic backgrounds. The participants were from various age groups: 20–30, 40–60, and 70–80. Domestic workers were also included to ensure representation of economically disadvantaged groups.

Basic demographic details such as age, education, occupation, and marital status were considered to understand variations in experience. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share personal narratives related to education, work, family expectations, and social mobility.

The study also refers to selected academic works for context, though the primary focus remains on lived experiences. Data was analysed thematically to identify patterns, generational differences, and key areas of change.

Results and Discussion

The study reveals that women's participation in public life evolved slowly, influenced by multiple social and economic factors. Clear generational differences can be observed.

Women belonging to the 70–80 age group recalled a time when their responsibilities and lives were largely limited to domestic spaces. Limited access to education and strict social control defined their experiences. However, some recalled early influences of reform movements and the freedom struggle, indicating the beginnings of change.

The 40–60 age group represents a transitional phase. Many gained access to education and employment, reflecting increased independence. They too faced persistent challenges such as workplace discrimination and the burden of balancing domestic and professional responsibilities.

The experiences of domestic workers highlight the impact of economic conditions. For many, limited education, early marriage, and financial dependence continue to restrict opportunities, showing that progress is not equally distributed.

Younger women (20–30) expressed greater confidence in accessing education and careers. Digital platforms were seen as important tools for awareness and opportunity. However, issues such as wage inequality, limited leadership roles, and societal expectations remain significant concerns.

Overall, the findings show that while women's roles have expanded, the process is ongoing and shaped by intersecting factors such as class, access to resources, and social norms.

Conclusion

The study shows that women in India have moved from restricted domestic roles to greater participation in public life. However, this transformation is neither linear nor complete. While legal reforms and educational opportunities have opened new pathways, deeply rooted social norms continue to influence everyday experiences.

At the same time, women's increasing presence in different fields reflects growing confidence and independence. True empowerment involves not only access to opportunities but also the freedom to make choices within one's social environment.



Recommendations

Henceforth, research should adopt a more clearly defined scope and include a larger, more diverse sample to capture wider differences in women's experiences. Greater emphasis should be placed on differences related to class, education, and location.

Government initiatives should prioritize better educational opportunities, vocational training, and digital accessibility, particularly for women belonging to marginalized communities. Workplaces should implement stronger measures to ensure equal pay, prevent harassment, and support work-life balance.

Encouraging women's participation in leadership requires both institutional support and broader social change. Community-level awareness programs can help challenge restrictive norms. Future research should make use of recent and diverse references in order to provide a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the subject.

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