India: How have society and the government contributed to women empowerment?

Research Objectives
- Evaluating the relationship between women's socio-economic condition and the development of society.
- Investigating the impact of social and governmental interventions on women empowerment in the last two decades (2000-2019) in India.
- Seeking potential evidence of the mutual influence and interaction between the government and women empowerment.

Why
- Although feminist movements and development agencies are increasingly concerned about women empowerment, the issue is largely uncovered by academic literature. This research sheds light on the dynamics of gender relations in India - the influence of culture, and the role of governmental interventions from society and the government. This study derives from the wish to explore the role of women empowerment, an issue constantly changing with the development of society, but which struggles more than others to receive the deserved attention and most importantly, to be enjoyed.

Themes and Discussion

Gender Equality and Indian Society
- Several factors play a role within the gender equality debate: location, religion, culture, traditions, society, level of overall development, type of government. The most relevant aspect within Indian reality for women is their supposed, or expected, lack of independence due to their lifelong life cycle (2).
- In the labour market, women are seen as having a “secondary status” (2), which can be read as a manifestation of the Eastern feeling (culturally derived) of men being superior to women. Furthermore, career advancement for women is more challenging compared to men, because of their stronger commitment to family responsibilities (2). In India, career choices are heavily affected by family's expectations related to status in society, values, and religion (2).
- Besides, corruption (bribery and nepotism) contributes to preventing the implementation of social policies and contribute to protect women's rights and improve gender equality (2).
- Misogyny is the manifestation of a wide gender difference, be it addressed as gender-neutrality, patriarchal viewpoints, or cultural traditions.

Education
- Education is suggested as a potential lever, in that comprehension derives from an awareness of one’s position in society and of higher rights (3). Interestingly, it was observed how many media do sometimes compensate for the absence of education.
- Education in India has historically been elitist (3). Broadly speaking, the majority of Dalit male Indians do not perceive the need to seek an education, since they cannot change their caste position in any case. They aim to obtain a corporate or government job and to achieve this, being educated is not strictly necessary (3). Education is not attractive to the young also due to potential salary differences compared to an MWE degree (3).
- Nevertheless, Barefoot College is an interesting instance of women empowerment occurring without education, relying solely on women's extraordinary intelligence, talent and skills, and their wish to help the community. This contradicts Western beliefs that certified education is the only way to progress in society (3).

Development and Empowerment
- Gender equality and women empowerment are argued to be two important aspects that help assess development (4). Demographics also contribute to assessing the development of a country, as improved demographic outcomes derive from a higher level of women empowerment. In 2004, the average Indian woman was found disempowered both in absolute and relative terms: it was proved that women empowerment over time has not significantly occurred (4).
- However, women's empowerment is informed by caste and hierarchy (4). In general, some degree of choice is required for an individual to speak or act differently, and having more choice compared to the past indicates empowerment.
- Microfinance is a key enabler of women empowerment (4). However, access to microfinance does not automatically entail women's capacity to challenge power systems in place at home and societal level (4).
- In conclusion, empowerment can be identified in any improvement against the limiting factors debated above - which confine women to a much smaller sphere of action and independence (4).