A Comparative Policy Analysis on Women's Empowerment and Its Impact on GDP in India and Latin America By Nora Beniwal

Abstract

This paper presents a comparative analysis of women-centric policy measures in India and three Latin American countries - Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia - highlighting their role in promoting women's empowerment and driving economic growth. Through a mixed-methods approach leveraging secondary data, the study explores labour force participation, wage disparities, maternal health, and education indicators to assess gender equality outcomes. Despite differences in socio-political structures, these nations face common challenges such as income inequality, violence against women, and limited representation in leadership. The findings underscore the gaps between policy intent and on-ground impact, revealing that economic development alone does not ensure gender parity. The paper concludes by outlining cross-country policy lessons and suggesting targeted interventions, such as STEM education, financial inclusion, reproductive rights, and gender-responsive budgeting, as catalysts for both social equity and GDP enhancement in developing economies.

1. Introduction

Women's empowerment and women entering the workforce is an important mission for the world. Their entry leads to an automatic increase in GDP of their respective countries by 2% (Duflo). With an increasing emphasis on female literacy and universal education, it is imperative that they receive the fruit of their labour. In Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and India, the average woman works longer hours per month than the average man (International Labour Office). But most of the women in the region are working for either pay or profit (World Bank). The percentage of employed women has increased in these economies, but the gender pay disparity is enormous (Oxfam India). Women in all these countries have played a major role in their countries' independence, despite this they are subject to discrimination, violence, and various forms of oppression because of their gender (National Commission for Women). It is important that economies and societies bring women into the workforce. The main reasons that prevent them from entering the workforce and contributing to the GDP are biological, societal, technological, and institutional (Banerjee and Duflo).

Empowering women not only creates a just and equitable society but also promotes health and well-being. The Latin American countries considered for this study are of the most unequal regions of the world. This inequality impacts the lives of millions of girls (UNDP, 2021; UNICEF Latin America, 2019). It has the second-highest adolescent birth rate. India, on the other hand, has most of its population in the rural areas. The Indian Constitution and so have those of the three Latin American countries, has enshrined that discrimination based on gender is

strictly prohibited. The women's reservation bill in India allocates 33% reservation at all levels of Indian politics. The current Prime Minister of India has launched various schemes to promote gender equality, eg: Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter), Pradhan Mantri Ujwala Yojana (Provision of Gas connection to women below the poverty line), and many more (Economic Survey of India 2022-23). In spite of these schemes, India's ranking in the global gender gap report commissioned by the World Economic Forum has not been very encouraging. Gender inequality in Latin America, according to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), has been indicated. Women aged between 25-34 live in extreme poverty. They have the largest share of divorced women among the female population in poverty. They held just 23.7% of parliamentary seats in 2017 (Sánchez Montaño et al.)

This paper examines gender inequality across the workforce, as well as the social, political, and economic spheres in India and selected Latin American countries. While all of these nations have made significant strides toward gender equality, they remain far from achieving their goals. Drawing on secondary data, the study offers a comparative analysis and outlines specific areas where these countries can learn from each other, considering their unique political and socio-economic contexts. The rationale for selecting these countries lies in their shared socio-cultural dynamics, particularly the patriarchal structures that often relegate women to secondary roles within families. Common issues include a societal preference for male children in areas such as education, property rights, and work opportunities; widespread violence against women; limited access to education; and, in some cases, the influence of drugs, warlords, and teenage pregnancies, especially prevalent in Latin America. India also contends with caste-based discrimination, while religion plays a role in shaping gender norms across all regions studied. Despite improvements in GDP and per capita income, the benefits of economic growth have largely failed to trickle down, with wealth remaining concentrated among the top percentile. This has exacerbated inequalities, both between economic classes and between genders.

2. Research Gap and Methodology

Although the countries studied have constitutionally recognized the special status of women and introduced various policy measures, the actual empowerment of women remains limited and uneven. Existing literature often examines each country's efforts in isolation, with limited comparative analysis across similar socio-political contexts. This study addresses this gap by offering a cross-national examination of gender-focused policies and outcomes in India, Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis. Quantitatively, the study relies on secondary data from credible sources, presented through tables and graphs to highlight trends in key social indicators such as labour force participation, maternal health, income levels, and educational attainment. Qualitatively, the paper analyses this data to evaluate the effectiveness of existing policies and identify areas for cross-country learning. The research particularly emphasizes the need for formulating evidence-based, contextually adaptive policy recommendations and stresses the importance of

stricter implementation of legislation related to health, education, and social welfare to achieve meaningful progress in women's empowerment.

3. Theoretical Background

Since its independence in 1822, Brazil's political landscape has undergone continuous changes. Two major events have taken place that contributed to massive changes in the political system. During 1955 to 1960, the per capita growth was 4.91%. There was rapid industrialization undertaken by the government, the private sector, and foreign investment. Moreover, during 1968 to 1973, Brazil took advantage of the world demand. This period coincided with the military dictatorship. The government adopted a lot of strategies like greater integration with international markets, centralized fiscal capacity, monetary correction, institutional reforms and changes UPI structure of subsidies. These policies led to the empowerment of the labour class, productivity, and an increase in literacy rate. It was a period that witnessed a movement away from the agricultural sector towards the manufacturing industry, leading to an increased per capita income. The period from 1980 to 1990 witnessed a very high inflation and population rate, resulting in a decline in per capita income by 5.5% (deindustrialization). After 1999, a set of measures was adopted to guide sustainable growth in the economy. It was during this period that illiteracy decreased, but despite this, it was still well below Mexico, Colombia, and India. The main reasons are the government's inability to improve the education system. In the early 2020s, the government increased the real minimum wage and per capita household income. This, along with the increasing world demand for raw materials, led to some reversal of deindustrialization.

Mexico moved on the path of gender equality, inclusivity, and women's empowerment in 2010. The efforts majorly focused on Economic growth, Access to credit and Financial systems stability. They launched schemes like the National Financial Inclusion Strategy (NFIS) that aimed to increase access to financial services, especially for those who have been left out of the regulated financial system. The governments have been successively adopting financial reforms, for example, the cash transfer programme called Prospera (payments are received through electronic accounts associated with debit cards to increase the financial sector's contribution to economic growth). Exclusion of a large number of people has led to slow development.

Colombia faces great challenges with respect to Gender equality, social inclusion, employment and wage gap, violence against women. There is a severe need to increase the emphasis on strengthening legal frameworks, improving access to justice and supporting victims of violence. India has been achieving higher labour force participation rates since 2018. India has a larger independent population (age group 15-59 years) as compared to its dependent population (0-15 years and above 60 years). Through reforms, the economy has reduced unemployment rates among women as compared to men. Certain articles of the constitution have recognised, endeavored to increase the status of women in society (National Commission for Women). The mandatory use of UPI payment for any transfer of benefits has brought great empowerment (Chen et al.). The current government has been working tirelessly to provide

schemes that help ease of work for women and ensure that the benefits go directly to women by encouraging them to open their bank accounts.

4. Results and Discussion

The following section presents the country-wise data on education and income for women for various programs that have been initiated by the countries. In certain cases, the impact was not as anticipated; reasons for this have been stated. Lessons to be learnt and the way ahead have been indicated.

### 4.1 Steps taken by Brazil toward Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality

The table below summarises data for Brazil over the years. Brazil has strong policies towards the protection of women. Girls tend to study longer than boys; nearly two-thirds of university graduates in Brazil are female. However, equal access to economic opportunities is still a distant goal. Women earn about 77 percent of men's wages and are concentrated in low-productivity, low-paying jobs (World Bank). During the COVID-19 pandemic, female labor force participation fell from 66 to 62 percent, and women in service sectors suffered from the virus and economic disruptions. By the end of 2021, women experienced higher unemployment - 13.9 percent (16.6 percent for Afro-Brazilian women) compared to the 11.1 percent country average. Maternal mortality and gender-based violence increased. Afro-Brazilian women face the worst obstacles in accessing health care, services, and jobs (Agência De Notícias – IBGE).

Table 1A: Labour Force Participation and Gender-wise Unemployment Rates in Brazil (2018-2023)

Year	Labour force participation	Unemployment Rates Women	Unemployment Rates Men
2018	57.9%	14.41%	12.3%
2019	70.4%	14.34%	11.94%
2020	54.7%	16.24%	11.8%
2021	58.4%	16.44%	10.67%
2022	62.70%	11.51%	7.48%
2023	53.1%	9.69%	6.61%

Source: World Bank Open Data

*Values may be approximated due to pandemic
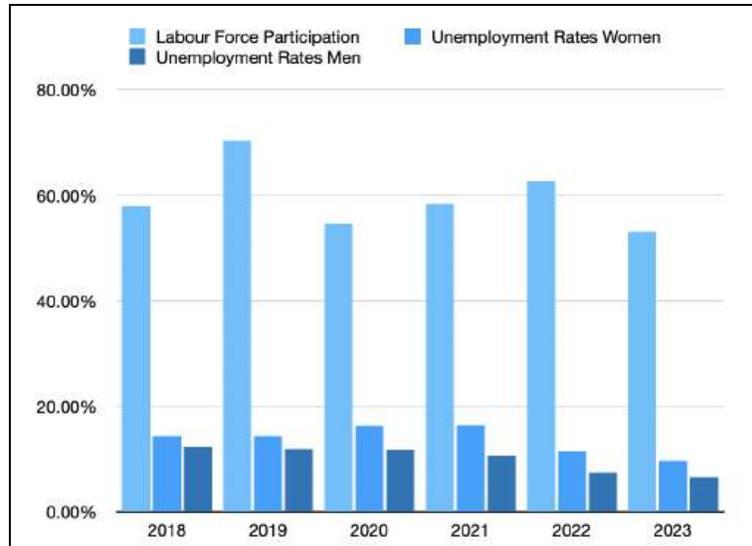
Figure 1A: Labour Force Participation and Gender-wise Unemployment Rates in Brazil (2018-2023)

Table 1B: Maternal Mortality Rate, Women's Average Monthly Income, GDP, and Per Capita Income in Brazil (2018–2023)

Years	Maternal Mortality Rate (%)	Women's average monthly income (USD)	GDP (USD)	Per Capita Income (USD)
2018	72	654.05[1]	1.92 trillion	9,629.6
2019	57.9	637.03[2]	1.873 trillion	9,010.51
2020*	67	512.3[3]	1.476 trillion	7,057.07
2021	107	458.98[4]	1.67 trillion	7,951.55
2022	57.7	467.39[5]	1.952 trillion	9,065
2023	18.6	518.63[6]	2.174 trillion	10,348

Source: World Bank Open Data

*Values may be approximated due to the pandemic

1 Conversion rate of Brazilian Reals into Dollars: 1 Real = $0.2576
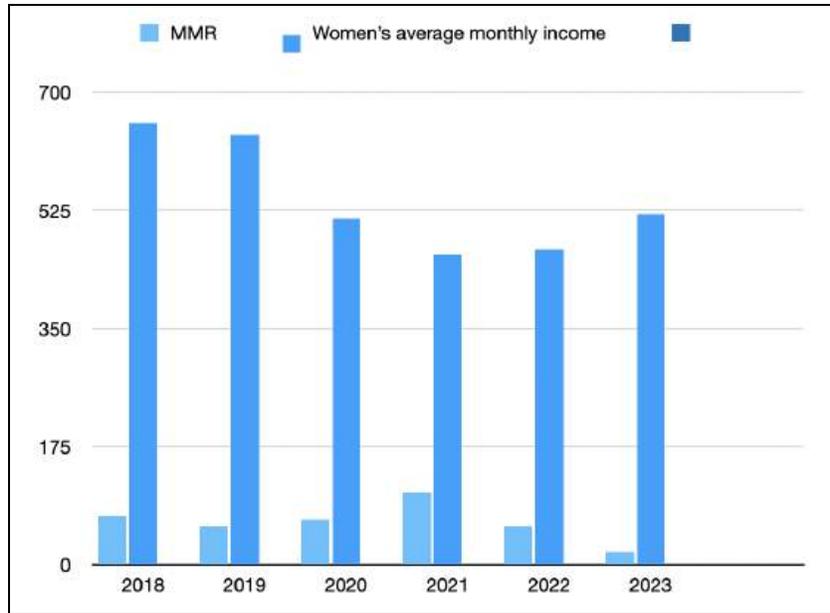
2 Conversion rate of Brazilian Reals into Dollars: 1 Real = $0.2540

3 Conversion rate of Brazilian Reals into Dollars: 1 Real = $0.1966

4 Conversion rate of Brazilian Reals into Dollars: 1 Real = $0.1856

5 Conversion rate of Brazilian Reals into Dollars: 1 Real = $0.1941

6 Conversion rate of Brazilian Reals into Dollars: 1 Real = $0.2004

Figure 1B: Maternal Mortality Rate, Women's Average Monthly Income, GDP, and Per Capita Income in Brazil (2018–2023)

The above figure is a 2D, self-generated one based on the information given in Table 1B. It indicates that in spite of a phenomenal increase in GDP and per capita income, women's average monthly income has in fact declined, indicating extreme income and gender inequalities. This is the reason why special effort has to be made for the upliftment of women; it is not an automatic process.

4.2 Steps taken by Mexico toward Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality

The World Bank has introduced a number of initiatives in the MSME (Micro Small Medium Enterprises) sector. The country is attempting to achieve gender equality by increasing investments in girls' education and simultaneously working towards higher representation of women in the decision-making process. There still exists a huge extent of inequalities in Education, Labour market, Wages, and Unpaid child care and housework. On the basis of analysis of data set as shown in Table and Figures 2A and 2B, it is apparent that there still exists a difference between the unemployment rates of men and women despite high GDP levels and concerted efforts by the World Bank. There are two main issues that need to be urgently addressed. The wage differential between men and women should be reduced and also, steps should be taken for reduction in the MMR (Maternal Mortality Rate).

Table 2A: Labour Force Participation and Gender-wise Unemployment Rates in Mexico (2018-2023)

Years	Labour Force Participation	Unemployment Rates Women	Unemployment Rates Men
2018	60.05%	3.28%	4.0%

2019	60.05%	2.7%	3.48%
2020*	47.18%	4.28%	3% (approx)
2021	63.8%	4.22%	4.44%
2022	65.45%	3.24%	3.32%
2023	59.4%	2.93%	2.77%

Source: World Bank Open Data

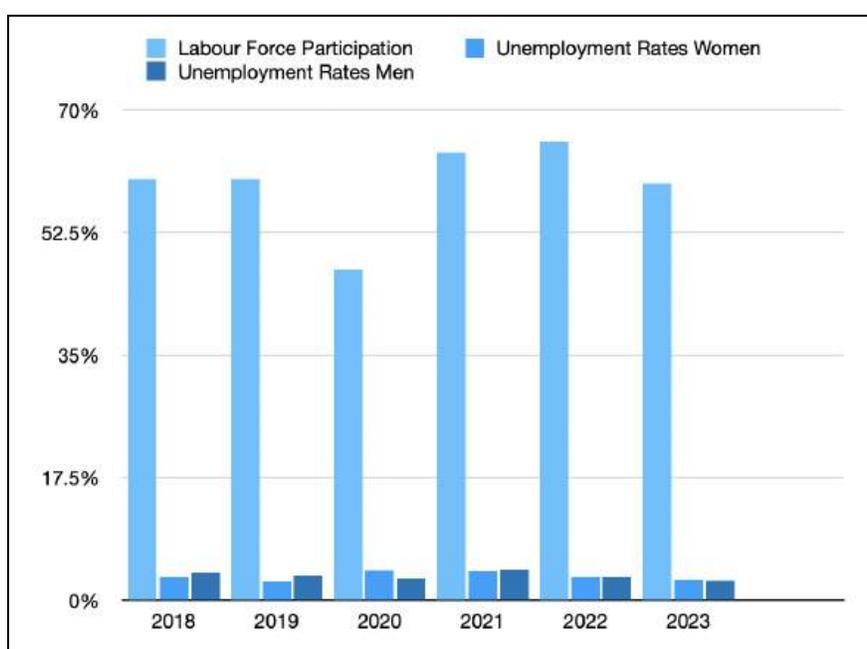*Values may be approximated due to the pandemic

Figure 2A: Labour Force Participation and Gender-wise Unemployment Rates in Mexico (2018-2023)
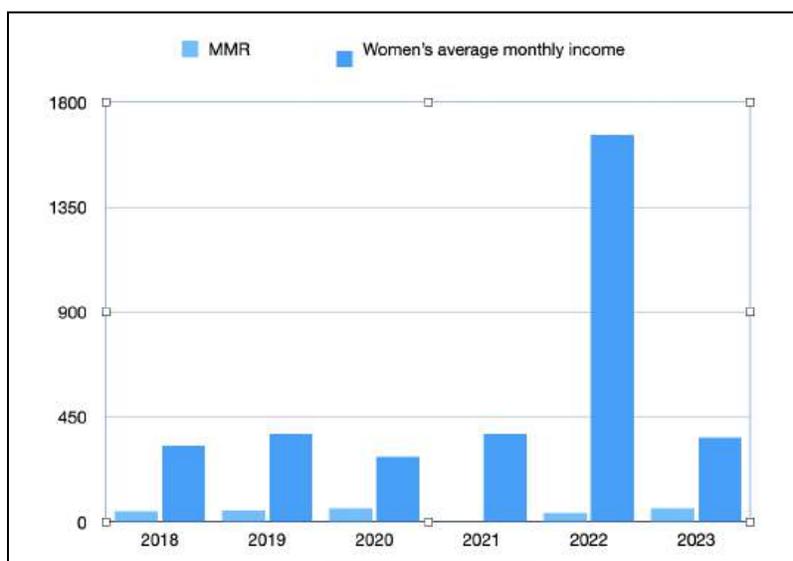
Table 2B: Maternal Mortality Rate, Women's Average Monthly Income, GDP, and Per Capita Income in Mexico (2018–2023)

Years	Women's average monthly income (USD)	Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR)	GDP (USD)	Per Capita Income (USD)
2018	300-350	47.3	1.256 trillion	10,296.87
2019	350-400	48.7	1.305 trillion	10,259.75
2020*	280 (approx)	59.1	1.121 trillion	8,741.22
2021	350-400	Unavailable due to the pandemic	1.316 trillion	9,922.196
2022	1695	38	1.464 trillion	10,077.38
2023	360	59	1.789 trillion	13,790

Source: World Bank Open Data

*Values may be approximated due to the pandemic

This graph shows a similar trend to what was seen in the case of Brazil. Despite a phenomenal increase in per capita income, the women's average monthly income has remained low. This indicates that extra effort and result-oriented policies need to be implemented. Funding from both domestic and international resources.

Figure 2B: Maternal Mortality Rate, Women's Average Monthly Income, GDP, and Per Capita Income in Mexico(2018–2023)

A median value was taken for the years 2018-23. As the values from the sources were in a range (indicated in Table 2B) this was used for better representation.

4.3 Steps taken by Colombia toward Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality

The World Bank and the United Nations are specifically working in the area of gender equality and women's empowerment. The main problem for Colombia, which has prevented inclusion, is decades of violent armed conflicts that have acted as barriers to equality. Imparting education in this country has not taken the path it should have due to the continuous violence. Table 3A, 3B, and figures 3A and 3B indicate a higher unemployment rate in women compared to that of men.

The difference was stark during the pandemic years (2020-2022). This gap continues to exist in 2023. Moreover, MMR (Maternal Mortality Rate) continues to be high and the wage differential between the two sexes continues to exist despite local policy and external aid.
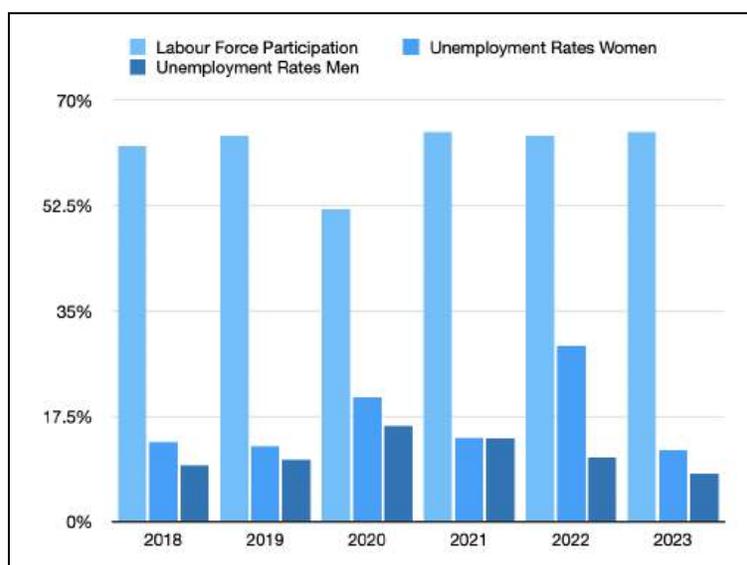
Table 3A: Labour Force Participation and Gender-wise Unemployment Rates in Colombia (2018-2023)

Year	Labour Force Participation	Unemployment Rate for Women	Unemployment Rate Men
2018	62.4%	13.2%	9.36%
2019	64.10%	12.5%	10.28%

2020*	51.84%	20.7%	15.98%
2021	64.7%	13.9%	13.8%
2022	64.1%	29.2%	10.55%
2023	64.7%	11.82%	7.986%

Source: World Bank Open Data

*values may be approximated due to pandemic

Figure 3A: Labour Force Participation and Gender-wise Unemployment Rates in Colombia (2018-2023)

Table 3B: Maternal Mortality Rate, Women's Average Monthly Income, GDP, and Per Capita Income in Colombia (2018–2023)

Year	Women's Average Monthly Income (USD)	Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR)	GDP (USD)	Per Capita Income (USD)
2018	525	63	334.2 billion	6,320
2019	281	80	323.06 billion	6,540.14
2020*	220	75	270.35 billion	5,892
2021	335	78	318.5 billion	6,223
2022	1,037	83.2	345.33 billion	6,681.73
2023	300	37	363.5 billion	6,947

Source: World Bank Open Data

*Values may be approximated due to the pandemic
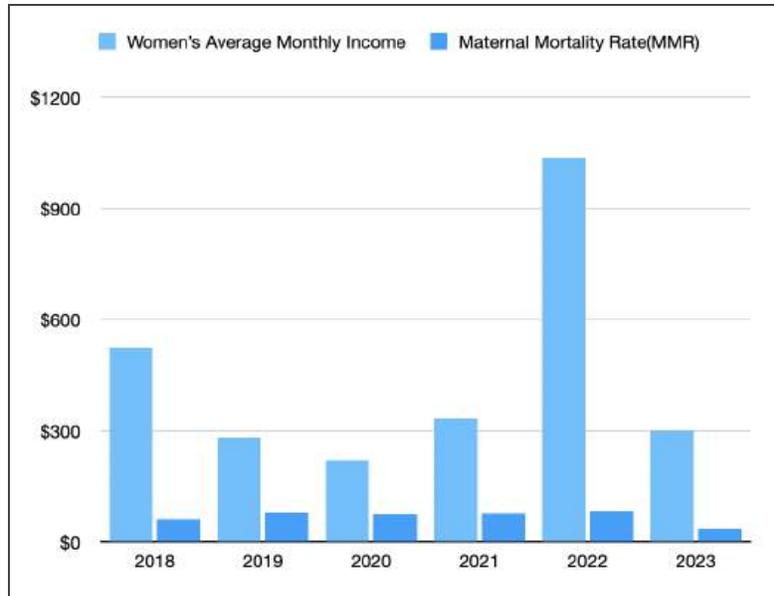
Figure 3B: Maternal Mortality Rate, Women's Average Monthly Income, GDP, and Per Capita Income in Colombia (2018–2023)

## 4.4 Steps taken by India toward Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality

In India, despite per capita income moving marginally up, the women's average monthly income is at approximately $280-$300 (similar to other countries discussed above). The unique feature is that despite the three Latin American countries having a higher per capita income, at times a little more than double, compared to India, the women's average monthly income for all four countries hovers around $400-$500. While in India, the gap does not seem to be that much. This clearly shows that the status of women is extremely deplorable in Latin American countries. India, too, needs to improve the status of women, and so do the other three countries, which can only be achieved through specific women-centric policy measures.

Table 4A: Labour Force Participation and Gender-wise Unemployment Rates in India (2018-2023)

Year	Labour Force Participation	Unemployment Rate Women	Unemployment Rate Men
2018	49.8%	5.1%	5.33%
2019	40.1%	4.2%	6.1%
2020*	54.9%	32%	7.86%
2021	55.2%	3.3%	6.6%
2022	58.3%	Over 6%	Over 7%
2023	60.1%	4.057%	3.2%

Source: World Bank Open Data

*Values may be approximated due to the pandemic
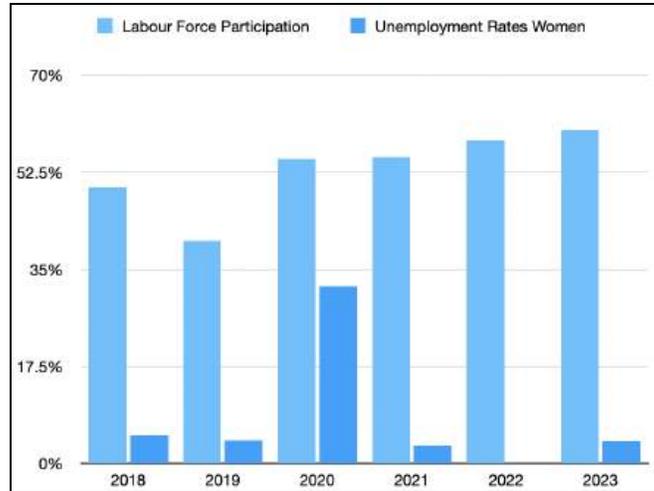
Figure 4A: Labour Force Participation and Gender-wise Unemployment Rates in India (2018-2023)

Table 4B: Maternal Mortality Rate, Women's Average Monthly Income, GDP, and Per Capita Income in India (2018–2023)

Year	Women's Average Monthly Income (USD)	Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR)	GDP (USD)	Per Capita Income (USD)
2018	190	97	2.703 trillion	1,974.38
2019	200	103	2.84 trillion	2,050.16
2020*	200	97	2.67 trillion	1,915.55
2021	352	97	3.167 trillion	2,250.18
2022	280	97	3.353 trillion	2,388
2023	280	-	3.57 trillion	2,481

Source: World Bank Open Data

*Values may be approximated due to the pandemic
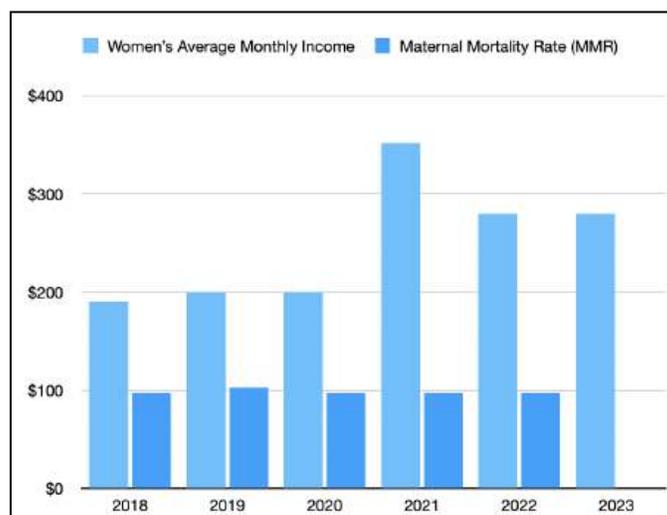
Figure 4B: Maternal Mortality Rate, Women's Average Monthly Income, GDP, and Per Capita Income in India (2018–2023)

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4.5 Comparison between the three Latin American countries and India:

Comparing tables 1B, 2B, and 3B indicates that the per capita income is at a higher level in Colombia (approximately $6,500 and above) compared to Mexico and Brazil. At the same time, the women's average monthly income has languished at a paltry level of approximately 300 dollars(The same is true for both Mexico and Brazil where the per capita income is higher than that earned by women).. Again, indicating that to help women, special governmental effort needs to be adopted.

Table 5: A comparative analysis of policies in India, Brazil, Columbia and Mexico

Category	India	Brazil	Colombia	Mexico
Legal & Constitutional Measures	Maternity Benefit Act, 2017 – 26 weeks paid leave (organised sector only) Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act, 2013 Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP), 2015	Maria da Penha Law (2006) Femicide Law (2015) Equal Pay Law (2023)	Law 1257 of 2008 – Protects women from violence Femicide Law (2015) Parental Leave Reforms	General Law on Women's Access to a Life Free of Violence (2007) – Strengthens legal framework against gender-based violence Femicide Law (2012) Equal Pay Law
Education & Skill Development	National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 – Gender inclusion in education Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana (SSY) Ujjwala Yojana	Women's Literacy Programs - STEM Encouragement for Girls – Increasing female participation in science & technology	STEM Programs for Women Conditional Cash Transfer Programs (Familias en Acción)	Bienestar Program STEM Scholarships for Women
Economic & Employment Empowerment	Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP) Mudra Yojana – Microfinance for women Mahila Shakti Kendra	Bolsa Família Program – Financial aid to families, prioritizing women Pronaf Mulher	Colombia's Gender Parity Initiative (GPI) Women Entrepreneurs Fund (Fondo Mujer Emprende)	National Institute for Women (INMUJERES) Microfinance Programs for Women
Political Representation & Leadership	Reservation for Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions – 33% of local government seats reserved for women	Quota Law (1997, updated 2009) – Political parties must allocate at least 30% of	Gender Quota Law (Law 1475 of 2011) – 30% female	Gender Parity Law (2020)– Mandates equal representation of men and women in political parties

	Proposed Women's Reservation Bill – Seeks 33% quota for women in Parliament	candidates to women National Secretariat for Women's Policies– Promotes female leadership	representation in public offices National Gender Equity Policy (Conpes 3918, 2018)	Electoral Reforms – Ensures more female candidates in elections
Safety & Security Measures	One Stop Centres (OSCs) – Support for women facing violence Nirbhaya Fund – Funds projects improving women's safety Fast-Track Courts for Gender-Based Violence Cases	Casa da Mulher Brasileira – Women's support centers Brazil Without Misogyny Campaign– Anti-sexism initiative	Purple Hotline (Línea Púrpura) – Domestic violence helpline Women's Justice Centers – Legal, psychological, & social support for survivors	Gender-Based Violence Shelters – Safe spaces for women Emergency Hotline 911 for Gender Violence
Reproductive Rights & Health	Ayushman Bharat Scheme – Free healthcare, including maternal care Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) – Encourages institutional childbirth	National Policy for Integral Attention to Women's Health Legalization of Abortion in Specific Cases	Decriminalization of Abortion (2022) – Legal up to 24 weeks National Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy	Abortion Decriminalization (2021) – Legalized nationwide Expanded Access to Contraceptives & Maternal Health Services

5. Summary of Results

5.1 What India Can Learn

India can strengthen women's empowerment by investing in STEM education, an area actively promoted in Latin American countries. From Mexico, India can adopt constitutional gender parity in government and reinforce women's property and inheritance rights. Brazil offers models like gender-sensitive police stations and government-funded childcare with paternity leave, which India could replicate to improve safety and reduce domestic burdens. From Colombia, India can learn to implement salary transparency laws and gender-responsive budgeting, ensuring equal pay and dedicated funding for women's programs across ministries.

5.2 What Brazil Can Learn

From India, Brazil can adopt digital tools like UPI and DBT to expand women's financial inclusion, especially in rural areas. The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), which ensures direct housing ownership for women, offers a model to enhance property security for low-income households. From Mexico, Brazil can learn from the "name and shame" policy that publicly lists companies violating equal pay laws, as well as Mexico's progressive stance on reproductive rights, including the full decriminalization of abortion. Colombia provides

examples of post-pandemic reemployment programs specifically targeting women and the enforcement of salary transparency laws. Brazil could mandate similar audits to ensure equal pay and facilitate women's return to the workforce.

5.3 What Colombia Can Learn

Colombia can strengthen its response to gender-based violence by adopting India's fast-track courts and clean cooking initiatives like the Ujjwala Yojana to improve rural women's health. From Mexico, it can enhance gender parity in governance through stricter political quotas and expand reproductive health and sex education services to address high teenage pregnancy rates. Brazil's models of community kitchens and integrated justice centers offer effective frameworks to tackle malnutrition and provide comprehensive support for survivors of domestic violence, both of which Colombia could replicate to improve outcomes for women.

5.4 What Mexico Can Learn

Mexico can benefit from India's success with digital financial inclusion through platforms like UPI and DBT, which directly empower women by ensuring efficient welfare delivery. Adopting India's targeted schemes for health, education, and financial security could complement Mexico's existing programs. From Brazil, Mexico can learn to develop integrated women's support centres and expand childcare and parental leave policies to reduce gendered domestic burdens. Colombia offers valuable insights through gender-sensitive budgeting and salary transparency laws, tools Mexico could use to embed equity in public spending and address persistent wage gaps.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to explore how targeted policy measures contribute to women's empowerment and, by extension, economic development in four developing economies: India, Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia. Using a comparative, secondary data-based approach, the paper examined gender disparities in labour force participation, wage gaps, maternal health, education, and representation. The findings underscore that while all four countries have taken meaningful steps toward gender equality, significant barriers persist, both in the design and enforcement of policies. Economic growth has not automatically translated into gender equity, and the benefits of rising GDP have often remained concentrated within the top percentiles, failing to reach most women, especially those from marginalized communities.

Each country faces a distinct set of challenges: Latin American nations grapple with widespread gender-based violence and high rates of teenage pregnancy, while in India, lack of employment opportunities for women, especially in rural areas, remains a major impediment to empowerment. Yet there are also valuable lessons to be exchanged. India's Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) schemes have fostered a greater sense of financial independence among women, while the Latin American focus on enhancing STEM participation and gender parity in governance could offer India meaningful direction. Cross-learning, such as the adoption of DBT

systems in Latin America and the promotion of STEM education in India, can serve as practical and transformative interventions. If implemented effectively, these strategies could boost GDP by a minimum of 2%, further empowering women by increasing government resources and redistributive capacity. The implications of this research are far-reaching. Policymakers, international organizations, gender rights advocates, and social sector planners can draw on these insights to design more inclusive, outcome-driven interventions. Programs that are not only well-intentioned but also rigorously implemented and monitored are essential to closing gender gaps and ensuring long-term social and economic resilience.

However, this study is not without limitations. It relies exclusively on secondary data, which while broad and reliable, may not fully capture the lived experiences of women or the ground-level efficacy of these policies. Additionally, the study is geographically limited to four nations, which may restrict the generalizability of its findings. Future research could incorporate primary qualitative insights through interviews, fieldwork, or surveys, and expand the comparative framework to include other regions such as sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. A deeper exploration into the intersectionality of gender with caste, ethnicity, and class would also strengthen future policy formulations. In conclusion, while progress is evident, the journey toward meaningful women's empowerment remains uneven. It is not enough to legislate; countries must also enforce and evaluate. The true measure of growth is not GDP alone, but how equitably its benefits are shared, particularly with those who have historically been excluded.

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