



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



## The role of corporate social responsibility in promoting women empowerment: A systematic review

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### Abstract

With the evolution of the concept of CSR from a philanthropic responsibility to a strategic tool for inclusive and sustainable development, it has become an important tool for promoting women empowerment in the country. This review paper summarizes the current literature and explores the contribution of CSR projects to the economic, social and psychological aspects of women empowerment. The paper reviews and critically examines the evidence of the impact of corporate interventions like skill development programs, financial inclusion initiatives, entrepreneurship support, and community engagement on women's capabilities and decision-making authority, based on peer-reviewed studies, policy papers and theoretical frameworks. The review reveals that CSR efforts can be measured to have positive impacts on women's income generation, social participation and self-efficacy. The impact of these efforts can differ greatly, however, due to other contextual factors like program design, regional variation, institutional support, and stakeholder collaboration. The research also highlights some of the main challenges in current CSR activities: short-term orientation, compliance approaches, and the lack of a monitoring and evaluation framework. The paper concludes that CSR has significant potential to empower women but the transformative power of CSR can be realized through a participatory, context specific and long-term approach to CSR that is aligned with SDGs.

**Keywords:** Corporate-Social-Responsibility (CSR); Women-Empowerment; Socio-Economic-Empowerment; Gender-Equality; Inclusive-Growth; Sustainable-Development; Empowerment-Outcomes

### 1. Introduction

The empowerment of women has become a key priority in sustainable development, demonstrating a world-wide effort towards gender equality and social justice. Although women have made significant strides in education, employment and legal rights, they still encounter widespread structural barriers, such as limited access to financial resources, poor representation in decision-making processes, and entrenched sociocultural norms which restrict their autonomy. The challenges indicate that solutions must be multidimensional more than just a policy intervention and require multiple stakeholders to be part of the solution. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become more and more significant in this context as a way for businesses to help improve the health of the community while at the same time improving the economy. Historically regarded as a philanthropic gesture, CSR has now evolved into a strategic and integrated approach that connects corporate goals to social and environmental issues. Stakeholder theory and Sustainable development have been gaining traction, which has led to an increasing focus on responsible practices by corporations in solving social problems such as gender inequality and women empowerment. The importance of CSR in the empowerment of women seems to be especially significant in developing nations like India, where the legislative framework, including the mandatory provisions for companies to spend on CSR, has established a place for corporate involvement in social development. Activities related to skill development, financial inclusion, promotion of

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entrepreneurship, health and education are gaining momentum within the corporations and have direct and indirect relevance to women empowerment. These interventions seek to improve women's economic independence and to make them feel better and more empowered socially and psychologically.

But CSR is not always and not simply an empowering phenomenon for women. Although there are many positive reports, there is an increasing amount of evidence that the effectiveness of CSR programs is dependent upon a number of factors, including program design, implementation, cultural context, and involvement of stakeholders. In many cases, CSR activities remain compliance-driven or short-term in nature, limiting their potential to bring about transformative and sustainable change. In addition, there is a lack of generally accepted definitions of what constitutes empowerment results, which complicates the analysis of the effect of CSR activities. In this context, a thorough and critical analysis of the literature is necessary to gain insight into the CSR concept and its impact on the empowerment of women. The aim of this paper is to review the existing research, to outline the current main themes and trends and to detect gaps for further research. In doing so, it seeks to give voice to academic discussion and enlightenment on CSR's potential to be a means of inclusive and sustainable development.

## 2. Theoretical Background

To understand the relationship of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and women empowerment, it is essential to have a strong theoretical background. This section incorporates concepts from critical theoretical strands that provide insights into the role of corporate activities and their effect on social change and empowerment.

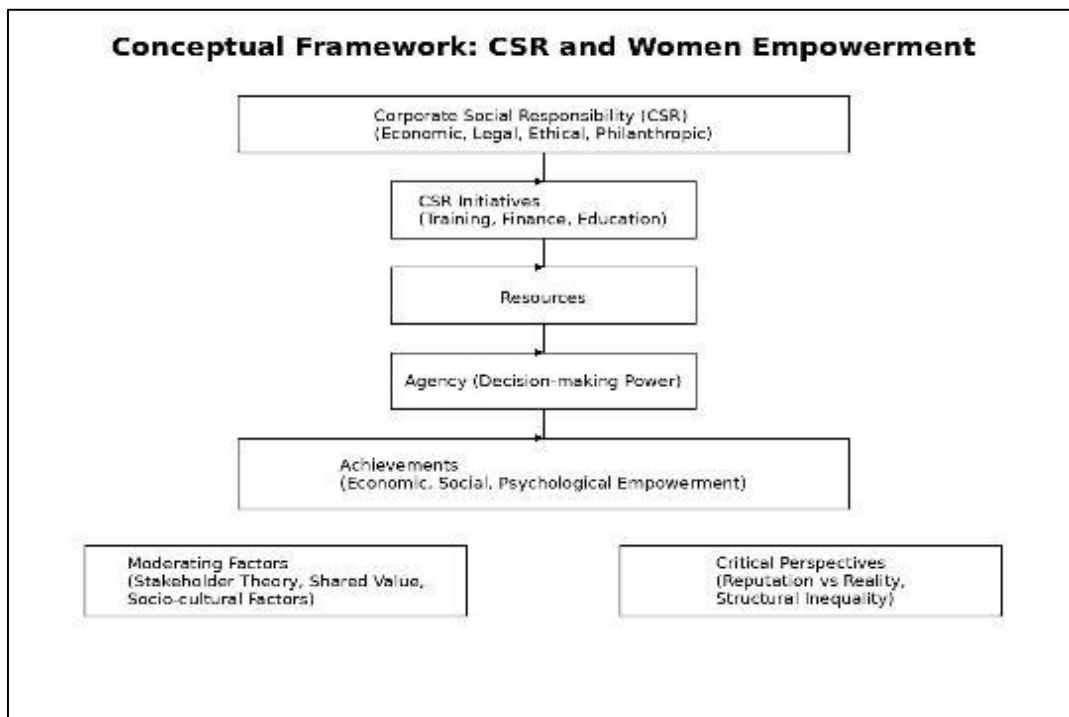


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

### 2.1. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is the moral responsibility that companies have to help achieve sustainable economic growth and promote the welfare of their employees, local communities and society in general. The initial ideas about CSR were mostly philanthropic, and involved items such as charity and community good. But modern viewpoints consider CSR as a strategic and integrated part of corporate governance. Carroll's CSR model is one of the most accepted models, which sees CSR as a four-layer structure consisting of economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities for companies. The framework emphasizes the need for businesses to not only be profitable but to also play within the rules, abide by ethics and help the society thrive.

Moreover, the stakeholder theory provides a critical view of CSR. It suggests that corporations have a responsibility to all their shareholders, but also to other stakeholders, such as employees, customers, communities and minority groups,

including women. In this regard, CSR activities that focus on women empowerment are the key elements of responsible business practice. Creating Shared Value is an extension of CSR, which focuses on value creation, namely that businesses can create economic value while at the same time creating social value as well. This way, women's empowerment through work, self-employment and education can be seen as leading to improvement in the performance of companies and society.

## 2.2. Women Empowerment: Concept and Dimensions

Empowerment of women is a multi-faceted and dynamic process which involves enhancing women's strategic capacity to make life choices in situations where this capacity was not previously available (Kabeer, 1999). It involves access to resources, participation in the decision-making process and desired outcomes. One commonly used definition of empowerment is in terms of three interrelated parts:

- Resources: Material, financial, human and social resources.
- Ability to set goals and take action to achieve them.
- Achievements: Results of using resources and agency effectively (Kabeer, 1999)

This approach highlights empowerment as not only being about giving women resources, but also about building their capacity to effectively use them.

There are three important aspects to consider when examining empowerment:

- **Economic Empowerment:** refers to access to income, employment opportunities, financial independence and control over economic resources (Duflo, 2012). This dimension is directly linked to CSR activities like skill development and Entrepreneurship Training.
- **Social Empowerment:** It's defined as an increase in social status, social mobility and social participation in community and household decision-making (Kabeer, 2005). This is where CSR programs focusing on education and awareness have an important role to play.
- **Psychological Empowerment:** This is related to self-confidence, autonomy and sense of control that is essential for empowerment to be sustained (Sen, 1999).

## 2.3. Linking CSR and Women Empowerment

The above theories can be linked to CSR and women empowerment. CSR activities function as a means of resource provision (e.g., training and financing), thereby increasing women's agency and improving results (Kabeer, 1999).

Empowerment of women from the stakeholder point of view, is a means of enhancing the general welfare of the society and this in turn would benefit the corporations with improved reputation and sustainable growth (Freeman, 1984). The shared value paradigm, likewise, proposes that investing in women's empowerment can yield benefits for businesses and communities as well (Porter & Kramer, 2011). But theory also offers some clues as to potentially limiting factors. Empowerment is not just something that can be handed down; it must be understood and implemented through participation and adaptation to the context. The CSR project can yield less or short-term results if it does not take local socio-cultural factors into account (Jamali & Karam, 2018).

## 2.4. Critical Theoretical Perspectives

Although CSR is focused on positive impacts, there are critical voices that recognize it can sometimes be a means of reputation management, rather than real social change (Banerjee, 2008). In such cases, an effort may be made to be aware instead of making an impact. Feminist approaches go beyond this and argue that structural inequalities need to be tackled as opposed to individual empowerment (Kabeer, 2005). If systemic issues, like gender discrimination and access to resources, are not explicitly tackled, CSR projects can have an insignificant impact.

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## 3. Methodology

The methodology used in this study is a systematic literature review which aims to examine the role of CSR in women empowerment in a critical manner. This research is a systematic literature review based entirely on secondary data to identify patterns, themes and gaps in the literature.

### 3.1. Research Design

The study is a qualitative and descriptive type of research which is focused on collecting, evaluating and interpreting secondary data systematically. Review-based approach is suitable method for this study, because this type of approach can be used to get a comprehensive picture of existing knowledge and theoretical development on CSR and women empowerment.

### 3.2. Data Sources

The data obtained for the study is completely secondary data that will be reliable and will have academic value. The sources include:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Academic books and book chapters
- Information on internet from international organizations (UN Women, World Bank etc.)

Workbook papers: conference papers and working papers

The following points are considered in order to maintain the quality: Only reputed journals and reputed institutions are taken into consideration.

### 3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

A systematic selection process has been adopted in order to guarantee the relevance and quality of the literature:

#### 3.3.1. Inclusion Criteria

Studies that focus on CSR and women empowerment are conducted. Studies on CSR and women empowerment are carried out.

- Articles from 2015 to 2025 (including basic theories)
- Institutional Reports: peer-reviewed and credible
- The studies covered economic, social and/or psychological empowerment.

#### 3.3.2. Exclusion Criteria:

- Additional sources outside of the academic realm like blogs, not verified websites
- Studies that do not have a clear methodological approach.
- Articles not directly related to CSR or gender empowerment

#### 3.3.3. Data Collection Procedure

Systematic searching in Academic Database is carried out in order to identify relevant literature, which includes the following:

- Google Scholar
- Scopus-indexed journals
- Web of Science

The following words have been used as keywords:

- "Corporate Social Responsibility and Women Empowerment"
- "CSR initiatives and gender equality"
- "Women empowerment in India's agriculture"

Selected studies are reviewed by title, abstract and full text to ensure that the studies meet the research objectives.

### 3.3.4. Data Analysis Technique

Thematic analysis method was used in this study to synthesize literature that was selected. This involves:

- Theme-based classification of studies on economic, social and psychological empowerment
- Recognizing patterns and relationships between various studies
- Critical evaluation of findings to assess consistency, contradictions and research gaps

Thematic analysis is a structured and systematic approach for interpreting qualitative data, thus appropriate for review-based research.

### 3.4. Reliability and Validity

- To guarantee the trustworthiness of the study:
- All sources used are peer-reviewed, high-quality sources.

More than one source is used; consistency of findings is achieved.

Theoretical frameworks (such as the CSR models, empowerment theories etc.) are introduced and applied to aid analysis

The results of the study however are dependent on the quality and scope of existing literature as it is a secondary study.

### 3.5. Limitations of the Methodology

The methodology is limited in several ways. The methodology has several limitations.

Although the methodology had a number of merits, there are also some drawbacks:

- Reliance on previous work, potentially biased
- Questions that rely on primary data to establish findings are not validated empirically.
- Limited database available for possible exclusion of relevant studies

These constraints are recognized for transparency and to further research.

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## 4. Literature Review and Analysis

In recent years the link between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and women empowerment has been given more and more attention in the academic field. The literature already available recognizes the potential of CSR programs to create a transformative effect and the factors that limit their success. This section makes a synthesis of the previous research in a thematic and critical analysis.

### 4.1. CSR and Economic Empowerment of Women

There is a considerable amount of CSR literature that highlights the importance of CSR activities for women's economic empowerment. Women's income generating potential and financial independence have been found to be improved through corporate initiatives like vocational training, microfinance assistance and entrepreneurship development programs (Duflo, 2012).

CSR-supported skill development initiatives provide women with the skills needed for the market, helping to increase their employability and their participation in the formal and informal job market. Moreover, financial services provided via CSR programs like microfinance and self-help groups have been associated with greater economic engagement of women. In contrast, the critical studies approach to CSR have pointed out that economic empowerment gained through CSR is restricted in its range. Income generating activities may not bring about long-term empowerment without the availability of markets, institutional support and financial sustainability (Kabeer, 1999). Hence, its economic benefits are not enough without structural changes.

#### **4.2. CSR and Social Empowerment**

CSR activities also help to empower women in society through increasing their visibility, status and role in the decision making of their community and household. Educational, awareness, and community involvement programs have been seen to increase women's mobility and their social recognition (Kabeer, 2005). Collected values of the CSR programs are generally reflected in a greater sense of confidence in expressing opinions and more involvement in collective decision-making processes. This change in social relations is especially important in the case of traditional societies with strict gender roles. Though these good results, literature indicates that social empowerment is highly contextual. Often, deeply ingrained cultural norms and patriarchal systems restrict how far women's improved capacities can be realized. This can lead to varying results of CSR projects in various regions and communities.

#### **4.3. CSR and Psychological Empowerment**

Although less concrete, psychological empowerment is one of the key components of empowerment. Research has shown that CSR campaigns can enhance women's self-confidence, self-efficacy and self-sufficiency (Sen, 1999). The self-image and dreams of women are influenced strongly by training programs, leadership development initiatives, and access to new opportunities.

This internal change can serve to trigger a wider empowerment effect in which women can better use resources at their disposal. A point is made in the literature, however, that psychological empowerment is empirically under-researched and under-measured, largely because it is hard to measure subjective experiences.

#### **4.4. Sectoral and Regional Variations in CSR Impact**

The impact of CSR activities is very different in different industry and geographical areas. In particular, CSR efforts in manufacturing and service industries can offer programs, such as training in skills and self-employment, while in rural and agricultural areas, they may emphasize job training and structured employment opportunities (Jamali & Karam, 2018). In addition, there are regional variations that have an influence on outcomes. However, socio-cultural factors, lower literacy rates, and poor infrastructure can limit the benefits of CSR efforts in developing economies, especially in rural areas. This implies that a "one size fits all" policy is not the answer and CSR strategies need to be adapted to local contexts.

#### **4.5. Critical Perspectives on CSR and Women Empowerment**

Although there are many positive references in the literature, there is an increasing number of studies that takes a critical stance on CSR practices. However, some scholars have suggested that some CSR programs may be undertaken for "compliance with the regulations" or "corporate image building" rather than for the purpose of social change (Banerjee, 2008).

This results in programs that are:

- Short-term and project-based
- Businesses have a finite scope and reach. Businesses can only reach so far and so big.
- Concentrated on being seen, not making a difference

In addition, there are weak monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that limit the ability to evaluate long term impact of CSR programmes. Not having beneficiaries in the design process further diminishes the relevance and sustainability. One of the feminist critiques is that CSR projects tend to deal with symptoms instead of root causes of gender inequality. If structural constraints like discrimination, lack of access to education and institutional biases are ignored, structural change cannot be achieved through CSR efforts (Kabeer, 2005).

#### **4.6. Synthesis of Literature**

The review of the literature shows that the change in women empowerment is not uniform and positive with CSR:

- There is strong evidence that there is an economic benefit.
- There are moderate levels of evidence for social empowerment.
- Some evidence of psychological empowerment, but increasing evidence of it

Meanwhile, there are still some major hurdles to be addressed:

- Lack of long-term sustainability
- Inadequate evaluation mechanisms
- Context-specific limitations
- Weak stakeholder collaboration

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## 5. Findings

The study concluded that the role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is very significant in empowering women in various aspects including economic, social and psychological. Women's income, decision making power, social participation and self-confidence are enhanced through CSR projects like skill development, support for entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, education and community engagement. Economic empowerment had the greatest effect, with social and psychological empowerment also positively affected. But the effectiveness of CSR programmes depends on the regional context, culture, the nature of the programme and on the participation of stakeholders. Strengths identified included the use of short-term CSR approaches, the lack of monitoring systems, insufficient sustainability, and low beneficiary participation were also identified.

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## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this review paper was to look at the literature and synthesize the concept of CSR in relation to women empowerment, both theoretical and empirical. The analysis also shows that CSR is now an important tool to tackle gender inequalities and promote inclusive development. In various research projects, CSR projects have been shown to contribute to an increase in the economic independence of women, to boost their social status and to contribute to their psychological agency.

The results suggest that CSR is most obviously linked with economic empowerment, namely, skill development, employment creation and empowerment of women entrepreneurs. They provide women with opportunities for income generation and develop their economic independence. Furthermore, CSR programmes have enabled social empowerment by ensuring women's participation in the decision-making processes in households and communities, boosting their societal visibility and recognition. In addition, and less often quantified, psychological empowerment comes out as a key result – greater self-confidence, independence and leadership skills. The review also notes however that the effects of CSR for women empowerment are not uniform and transformative. A number of contextual factors, including socio-cultural norms, regional differences, program design and stakeholder participation, greatly affect the effectiveness of CSR efforts. One recurring problem in the literature is the adoption of short-term and compliance CSR policies which tend to be more about 'showing up' than about real change. Moreover, limited participation of women in programme planning and implementation and weak monitoring and evaluation tools limit the sustainability and depth of empowerment achievements. Theoretically, the paper highlights the need to combine the concepts of CSR with empowerment models to gain a deeper insight into the ways in which CSR programs impact women's lives. Inequalities are deeply entrenched and CSR can be a catalyst for empowerment through resources and opportunities, but it will not solve the inequalities itself. Empowerment is a multifaceted and multifunctional process that needs to be achieved through a combination of corporate strategy and supportive public policies, institutional frameworks and community involvement. Finally, CSR has significant potential as a women empowerment mechanism, but it remains to be seen if it can or will be transformed from a philanthropy and compliance based to a strategic, participatory and impactful model. Future CSR programs should focus on sustainability, program design that is relevant to the local context, and the meaningful engagement of women throughout the program development process. Greater cooperation among corporations, governments and civil society will be pivotal to inclusive and equitable empowerment results.

### *Recommendations*

Long-term, participatory and sustainable CSR practices need to take a more direct approach to women's needs and socio-cultural context. Skill development, entrepreneurship, education, financial literacy, and leadership training should be the main thrust of CSR programs so as to ensure the holistic empowerment of the beneficiaries. Incorporating women's input in planning, implementation and evaluation to enhance relevance and effectiveness. Effective monitoring and impact assessment systems should be put in place to track outcomes and hold accountable. Cooperation between corporations, government, non-governmental organizations and communities is necessary to have a greater impact. CSR initiatives should align with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to promote inclusive growth and lasting gender equality. Inclusive growth and long-lasting gender equality can be supported through initiatives in CSR that are connected to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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