



# FROM TRADITION TO TRANSFORMATION

*“Empower a woman, and you empower a community.”*

A McKinsey study estimates that empowering women could add \$750 billion to India's economy by 2025. How would that change our society? This profound truth resonates deeply as we celebrate Navratri every year, a festival that honours the divine feminine energy embodied by Goddess Durga. Navratri is not merely a time for festivities; it serves as a powerful reminder of the strength, resilience, and potential for women. It invites us to reflect on how traditional celebrations can uplift women's status in society, creating a ripple effect that extends beyond economic empowerment to social change.

Navratri, which translates into “nine nights”, is a vibrant celebration that honours Shakti, or divine feminine power. Each night is dedicated to one of Durga's nine avatars, representing qualities such as strength, wisdom, compassion, and determination. The story of Durga defeating the demon Mahishasura symbolises the triumph of good over evil, serving as a metaphor for the struggles women face today – whether against social norms, gender bias, or personal challenges. This festival encourages us to reflect on our own lives and the powerful women who inspire us. It invites us to recognise that femininity and strength are not mutually exclusive; they can coexist beautifully. Just as Durga embodies both nurturing qualities and fierce strength, contemporary women can embrace their femininity while asserting their agency in various spheres of life.

Countries around the world have successfully leveraged traditional festivals to uplift women's status in society. In Bangladesh, the celebration of Durga Puja transcends religious observance; it has become a platform for women's empowerment. During this time, women lead community initiatives that promote education and health awareness. The festival fosters a sense of unity and encourages women to take on leadership roles within their communities.

In Mexico, the Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebrates the lives of the deceased loved ones but also highlights the contributions of women in family and society. This cultural event empowers women by allowing them to express their grief and celebrate their heritage openly. It has become a space for women to share stories of resilience and strength while advocating for social issues such as gender violence. An inspiring example can also be found in the Mosuo community in China, known for its matrilineal traditions. Here, women hold significant power within their households and communities. The Mosuo practice “walking marriages”, where relationships are consensual but do not require cohabitation. Women manage family affairs and inherit property from their mothers, fostering an environment where female autonomy is celebrated. This unique structure allows for greater social support among women and contributes to their overall well being.

Across India, numerous ordinary women have emerged as beacons of empowerment through their remarkable achievements. Amrapali, was among the first women to join Project Nimanshree in Maharashtra. Initially an unskilled labourer earning meagre wages, she transformed her life through training in construction skills provided by Habitat for Humanity India. With newfound confidence and skills, Amrapali now supports her family while inspiring others in her community. Another inspiring figure is Nirupama Pramanik from West Bengal. Married off early, she was trained by Magic Bus on essential skills for customer service roles. Today, she earns over Rs.10,000 per month as a customer care executive – an achievement that marks her financial independence and sets an example for other young women in her community. Pinki Kumari, from Jharkhand, faced financial struggles growing up but persevered through training as an Automotive machining Technician. Now one of her family’s highest earners at Rs. 11,000 per month, Pinki embodies the spirit of empowerment through education and skill development. These stories highlight that empowerment is not just about climbing corporate ladders; it is about lifting oneself and others through determination and resilience.

While celebrating these achievements, we must also confront the issue of time poverty, first introduced by economist Clair Vickery. Time Poverty refers to the lack of time available to individuals due to multiple responsibilities – especially prevalent among working women who juggle paid employment with household duties). Data shows that women in India spend an average of 19.5% of their daily time on unpaid domestic work compared to only 2.5% for men (NSO, 2019). In rural areas, many women face acute levels of time poverty due to societal norms that prevent them from asking men to share household responsibilities. This imbalance not only affects their personal well-being but also limits their economic opportunities. For instance, Oxfam’s India Inequality Report 2020 highlights how societal expectations force women into unpaid labour while they strive for paid work outside the home.

The implications of time poverty are profound: it restricts women’s ability to engage fully in economic activities or pursue education and personal development opportunities. Addressing this issue requires systemic changes that promote shared responsibilities within households and encourage equitable participation in both paid and unpaid labour. As we celebrate these empowering stories during Navratri every year, we must also recognise the importance of instilling respect for women in future generations. Teaching children from a young age to honour and respect all individuals – regardless of gender – is crucial for building a society that is gender-responsive and equitable. Research indicates that children form their understanding of gender norms between the ages of three and seven. This formative stage presents an opportunity to instil values of equality and respect. Countries like Austria, which has enshrined gender equality in its constitution and integrated gender studies into educational curricula, serves as models for fostering respect among children. Parents also have a significant influence; modelling respectful behaviour towards all genders sets an example for children to follow. Encouraging boys to stand up against injustice towards girls fosters empathy and creates allies in the fight for equality.



As we reflect on these lessons during our yearly Navratri celebrations, it becomes evident that cultural practices can serve as powerful tools for promoting gender equality when combined with educational initiatives aimed at young people. Having established how individual acts of empowerment contribute to personal and community welfare, it's essential to recognise the collective impact on broader economic growth. Increasing women's participation in the labour force is crucial for accelerating economic development in India.

Studies consistently show that empowering women leads to improved family health, education and economic stability. As more women enter the workforce, they contribute not only to household income but also to national productivity. If women's participation in India's labour force were to equal to men's, it could potentially increase India's GDP by 27% equating to approximately \$770 billion by 2025.

Empowering women economically creates a ripple effect: educated mothers raise educated children who become productive members of society. This cycle fosters sustainable development and innovation. When women engage in entrepreneurship or skilled labour, they uplift their families while significantly contributing to local economies. Moreover, companies with diverse leadership teams have been shown to outperform their peers financially. This underscores the importance of including women's voices in decision-making processes across all sectors – businesses thrive when they embrace diversity.

Navratri itself serves as an economic catalyst during its celebration period – the surge in economic activities provides employment opportunities for local vendors and artisans. Thus, it illustrates how cultural celebrations can align with modern corporate social responsibility principles by providing community support and sustainable economic development.

As we celebrate Navratri every year moving forward, let us honour the powerful women in our lives while recognising our collective responsibility towards future generations. Empowerment comes in many forms – whether through leadership roles or everyday acts of courage and resilience. Each woman's journey contributes to a collective strength that drives societal change.

Let us remember: powerful women do not need to conform to rigid stereotypes; they can thrive in their authenticity while inspiring others along the way. As we honour Goddess Durga during Navratri, let us commit ourselves to fostering environments where all women can flourish – because when women rise, entire communities rise with them.