

# Corporate Social Responsibility and Women Empowerment: A Comprehensive Analysis of Strategies, Impacts, and Future Directions

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## Abstract

*This research paper examines the multifaceted relationship between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives and women empowerment within the context of sustainable development goals. Drawing upon stakeholder theory and institutional theory frameworks, this study analyzes how corporations leverage CSR programs to advance gender equality, enhance economic participation, and foster social inclusion of women across diverse sectors and geographical contexts. The paper systematically reviews empirical evidence from emerging and developed economies, examining CSR interventions in areas including skill development, financial inclusion, board gender diversity, and community development programs. Key findings indicate that strategically designed CSR initiatives significantly contribute to women's economic empowerment, decision-making capacity, and social mobility. The study also identifies critical success factors and challenges in implementing effective CSR-driven women empowerment programs. Recommendations for corporate practitioners, policymakers, and researchers are provided to optimize the transformative potential of CSR in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) on gender equality.*

**Keywords:** Corporate Social Responsibility, Women Empowerment, Gender Equality, Sustainable Development Goals, Stakeholder Theory, Board Gender Diversity, Financial Inclusion

## 1. Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has evolved from a peripheral philanthropic activity to a central strategic imperative for businesses worldwide. The integration of gender equality and women empowerment within CSR frameworks represents a significant paradigm shift in how corporations conceptualize their societal responsibilities. Women empowerment, as articulated by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), encompasses multiple dimensions including economic participation, educational access, health outcomes, political representation, and freedom from discrimination and violence (United Nations, 2015).

The relationship between CSR and women empowerment has gained substantial scholarly attention following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. SDG 5, which specifically addresses gender equality and women empowerment, has catalyzed corporate engagement in gender-focused initiatives. According to Beloskar et al. (2024), the management literature on gender

equality and women empowerment has experienced exponential growth since 2015, reflecting heightened academic and practitioner interest in this domain.

Despite persistent gender disparities globally, CSR initiatives have demonstrated significant potential to address structural barriers facing women. Research indicates that corporations increasingly recognize the business case for gender equality, with studies showing positive correlations between gender-inclusive practices and organizational performance (Velasco-Balmaseda et al., 2024). The Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs), established through UN Women and UN Global Compact partnership, provide a framework for businesses to advance gender equality across operations, supply chains, and communities.

This paper aims to comprehensively analyze the nexus between CSR and women empowerment by: (1) examining theoretical frameworks underpinning CSR-driven gender initiatives; (2) reviewing empirical evidence on CSR impacts on women's economic, social, and political empowerment; (3) identifying successful CSR strategies and best

practices; and (4) proposing recommendations for enhancing CSR effectiveness in promoting gender equality. The study contributes to the growing body of literature by synthesizing diverse perspectives and providing an integrated framework for understanding CSR's role in women empowerment.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinnings of CSR and women empowerment draw from multiple disciplinary perspectives. Stakeholder theory, as articulated by Freeman (1984), provides a foundational framework for understanding corporate obligations beyond shareholders. Contemporary interpretations of stakeholder theory emphasize that corporations must balance diverse stakeholder interests, including those of women as employees, consumers, community members, and supply chain participants (Mogaji et al., 2021).

Institutional theory offers complementary insights into how organizations respond to normative pressures regarding gender equality. According to Velasco-Balmaseda et al. (2024), corporations increasingly adopt gender equality standards as voluntary sustainability initiatives become embedded in CSR reporting frameworks. The institutional environment shapes corporate behavior, with regulatory requirements, industry norms, and stakeholder expectations collectively influencing CSR approaches to women empowerment.

Social role theory provides additional theoretical grounding for understanding gender dynamics in corporate contexts. Research by Liu et al. (2022) demonstrates that women directors tend to adopt democratic and communal leadership styles, exhibit greater sensitivity to ethical issues, and demonstrate higher involvement in corporate charitable activities. These behavioral differences suggest that increasing female representation in corporate leadership may naturally enhance CSR orientation toward gender-inclusive practices.

### 2.2 CSR and Gender Equality: Conceptual Evolution

The integration of gender equality within CSR frameworks has evolved significantly over the past three decades. Early CSR conceptualizations,

exemplified by Carroll's (1991) pyramid model comprising economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities, did not explicitly address gender dimensions. However, contemporary CSR discourse increasingly recognizes gender equality as integral to corporate sustainability (Grosser & Moon, 2005).

According to Alhosani et al. (2023), bibliometric analysis of 1,961 peer-reviewed articles reveals that research linking board gender diversity and CSR has grown substantially since 2010. Keywords such as 'gender equality,' 'sustainable development,' and 'women empowerment' have emerged as dominant themes, indicating scholarly convergence around these interconnected concepts. The study identifies three primary research clusters: board composition and governance, gender equality and sustainability, and corporate social performance.

Grosser et al. (2017) argue that women have historically been marginalized in stakeholder considerations and CSR discussions. However, the growing emphasis on stakeholder engagement and the incorporation of employees among primary stakeholders has facilitated increased attention to gender-related CSR practices. Contemporary CSR frameworks, including Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) guidelines and UN Principles for Responsible Investment, now incorporate gender-specific indicators and reporting requirements.

### 2.3 Dimensions of Women Empowerment through CSR

Women empowerment through CSR encompasses multiple interconnected dimensions. Mogaji et al. (2021) identify four primary levels of CSR-driven engagement: healthcare empowerment, financial empowerment, social empowerment, and career empowerment. Their analysis of Nigerian banks reveals that CSR initiatives target different groups of women, including women at large, women in business, and women in careers, through differentiated intervention strategies.

Economic empowerment represents a central focus of CSR initiatives. Mengstie (2022) demonstrates that microfinance and financial inclusion programs significantly impact women's economic empowerment by improving independent income, increasing asset possession, and enhancing savings capacity. Similarly, Rosca et al. (2020) highlight

how social entrepreneurship processes in emerging markets position women as agents of economic change.

Skill development and education constitute another critical dimension. Research by Dixit et al. (2023) emphasizes the role of social entrepreneurial

leadership and benchmarking in women empowerment, particularly through vocational training and capacity building initiatives. CSR-funded skill development programs have demonstrated effectiveness in enhancing women's employability and entrepreneurial capabilities (Rajawat & Shukla, 2024).

**Table 1: Dimensions of Women Empowerment through CSR Initiatives**

Dimension	Key Components	CSR Interventions
Economic	Income generation, asset ownership, financial independence, entrepreneurship	Microfinance, SHG support, livelihood programs, supply chain integration
Educational	Skill development, vocational training, digital literacy, formal education	Scholarship programs, training centers, e-learning initiatives
Social	Decision-making, community participation, social networks, gender norms	Community programs, awareness campaigns, women's groups
Political	Leadership representation, governance participation, advocacy	Board diversity initiatives, leadership programs, policy advocacy
Health	Reproductive health, maternal care, nutrition, mental wellbeing	Healthcare access programs, sanitation initiatives, health awareness

*Source: Compiled from literature review*

### 3. CSR Strategies for Women Empowerment

#### 3.1 Board Gender Diversity Initiatives

Board gender diversity has emerged as a prominent CSR strategy with demonstrated impacts on corporate social performance. Liu et al. (2022) utilize a global sample and staggered difference-in-differences research design to establish causal relationships between board gender diversity reforms and CSR outcomes. Their findings indicate that countries implementing board gender diversity reforms experience significant improvements in firms' CSR performance, with effects particularly pronounced in countries with greater gender equality norms.

Kamran et al. (2023) extend this analysis to an international setting, examining how cultural dimensions moderate the relationship between board gender diversity and CSR. Their research demonstrates that the impact of female directorship on CSR varies across societies, with tender societies (characterized by cooperation and caring) exhibiting stronger positive relationships compared to tough societies. This finding underscores the importance of considering institutional contexts when designing gender diversity initiatives.

Wasiuzzaman and Subramaniam (2023) investigate board gender diversity effects on Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) disclosure, comparing developed and developing nations. Their analysis reveals significant variations in the relationship across economic contexts, suggesting that institutional factors including regulatory frameworks, investor expectations, and cultural norms shape how board gender diversity translates into CSR outcomes.

#### 3.2 Financial Inclusion and Microfinance

Financial inclusion represents a critical pathway for women's economic empowerment through CSR. Mengstie (2022) provides empirical evidence that microfinance services significantly impact women's economic empowerment, with age, marital status, education level, credit amount, and training having significant effects. The study demonstrates that microfinance improves women's independent income, increases asset possession levels, and enhances monthly saving amounts.

Kandpal et al. (2023) examine financial inclusion as a mechanism for women empowerment within the circular economy framework. Their research highlights the gender gap in financial access and articulates how CSR-driven financial inclusion initiatives can address structural barriers. The study

emphasizes the role of technology-enabled financial services in expanding women's economic participation, particularly in rural and underserved communities.

Adera and Abdisa (2023) investigate the relationship between financial inclusion and women's economic empowerment in Ethiopia, finding positive and statistically significant impacts. Their research contributes to understanding how CSR-supported microfinance programs can address context-specific barriers to women's economic participation in developing economies. The findings suggest that tailored financial products and accompanying capacity-building services enhance empowerment outcomes.

### 3.3 Skill Development and Education Programs

Skill development programs constitute a major avenue through which CSR initiatives advance women empowerment. According to Rajawat and Shukla (2024), CSR strategies focused on skill development demonstrate significant impacts on women's socio-economic status across diverse regions and sectors. Their research identifies regional and sectoral variations in intervention

effectiveness, emphasizing the importance of context-sensitive program design.

Corporate skill development initiatives have expanded beyond traditional vocational training to encompass digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and soft skills. Companies including Hindustan Unilever (Project Shakti), Godrej (Salon-i), and Mahindra (Pride Classrooms) have implemented large-scale women-focused training programs with demonstrated impacts on employment and entrepreneurship outcomes. These programs typically combine technical skill training with financial literacy, business development support, and mentorship components.

The integration of technology in skill development has created new opportunities for scalable impact. Digital training platforms and partnerships with technology companies have enabled CSR programs to reach women in remote and underserved areas. Research suggests that hybrid training models combining online learning with in-person support yield optimal outcomes for women's skill acquisition and subsequent employment (Singh & Yadav, 2023).

**Table 2: Impact of CSR Initiatives on Women Empowerment Indicators**

CSR Initiative Type	Empowerment Outcome	Impact Level	Key Studies
Board Gender Diversity	CSR Performance Enhancement	High	Liu et al. (2022)
Microfinance Programs	Income & Asset Growth	High	Mengstie (2022)
Skill Development	Employment & Entrepreneurship	High	Rajawat & Shukla (2024)
Healthcare Access	Health Outcomes & Awareness	Moderate	Mogaji et al. (2021)
Community Development	Social Capital & Networks	Moderate	McCarthy (2023)

*Source: Synthesized from empirical studies reviewed*

## 4. Regional and Sectoral Analysis

### 4.1 CSR for Women Empowerment in Emerging Economies

Emerging economies present unique contexts for CSR-driven women empowerment initiatives. In India, the mandatory CSR provision under the Companies Act 2013 has catalyzed corporate investment in gender-focused programs. Singh and Yadav (2023) provide dimensional mapping of CSR and SDG alignment in emerging economies, highlighting how regulatory frameworks shape corporate approaches to women empowerment. Research indicates that Indian companies have

increasingly prioritized women empowerment as a CSR focus area, with initiatives spanning skill development, livelihood enhancement, and financial inclusion.

African contexts present distinct challenges and opportunities for CSR-driven women empowerment. Mogaji et al. (2021) examine how Nigerian banks employ CSR initiatives to empower women's economic participation. Their research identifies investment foundations including SDGs, Women's Empowerment Principles, and Nigerian Sustainable Banking Principles that guide CSR interventions. The study highlights how banks target different groups of women through differentiated

healthcare, financial, social, and career empowerment strategies.

McCarthy (2023) critically examines CSR women's empowerment programs in Ghana through a feminist Foucauldian lens. Her analysis reveals complexities and unexpected outcomes in CSR empowerment programs, questioning assumptions about 'women' as a homogeneous category and examining what corporations seek to 'empower' women from or toward. This critical perspective emphasizes the importance of understanding local contexts, power dynamics, and women's agency in designing effective interventions.

#### 4.2 Sectoral Perspectives on CSR and Women Empowerment

The banking and financial services sector has emerged as a leader in CSR-driven women empowerment. Research demonstrates that financial institutions have developed comprehensive frameworks for women's economic inclusion, combining microfinance products with capacity building and business development support. The sector's proximity to financial resources and expertise positions it advantageously for delivering

financial empowerment interventions (Kandpal et al., 2023).

The technology sector has increasingly invested in women's digital empowerment through CSR programs. Initiatives focusing on digital literacy, coding skills, and technology careers aim to address the gender digital divide. Companies have partnered with educational institutions and non-governmental organizations to deliver training programs that prepare women for employment in the digital economy. Research suggests that technology-focused CSR programs can create multiplier effects by enabling women to participate in high-growth economic sectors.

Agricultural and extractive industries present particular challenges for women empowerment. Rosca et al. (2020) analyze how women entrepreneurs serve as agents of change in emerging market contexts, including agricultural value chains. The research highlights how social entrepreneurship processes can empower women while addressing broader sustainability challenges. Supply chain CSR initiatives in these sectors increasingly incorporate gender-specific components to ensure women benefit from economic opportunities.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework - CSR and Women Empowerment Nexus**

[EDITABLE DIAGRAM PLACEHOLDER]

#### THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Stakeholder Theory | Institutional Theory | Social Role Theory

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#### CSR STRATEGIES

Board Diversity | Financial Inclusion | Skill Development | Supply Chain | Community Programs

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#### WOMEN EMPOWERMENT DIMENSIONS

Economic | Educational | Social | Political | Health

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#### SDG 5: GENDER EQUALITY

Targets 5.1 - 5.c: Discrimination | Violence | Participation | Rights | Technology

*Source: Author's conceptualization based on literature synthesis*



## 5. Challenges and Barriers

Despite the potential of CSR initiatives to advance women empowerment, significant challenges and barriers persist. McCarthy's (2023) feminist critique highlights that CSR empowerment programs often operate on problematic assumptions about women as a homogeneous group, failing to account for intersectional identities and diverse experiences. The research questions whether corporate-led empowerment strategies adequately address structural inequalities or merely accommodate women within existing systems of power.

Cultural and social barriers present formidable challenges to CSR effectiveness. Research indicates that traditional gender norms, family responsibilities, and community expectations can limit women's participation in CSR programs. Rajawat and Shukla (2024) emphasize the need for culturally sensitive and context-specific CSR interventions that address unique needs and challenges faced by women in different regions. Programs that fail to account for local cultural

contexts may experience limited uptake or unintended consequences.

Implementation challenges including inadequate funding, limited monitoring and evaluation, and sustainability concerns affect CSR program effectiveness. Research suggests that many CSR initiatives remain fragmented and short-term oriented, limiting their transformative potential. The lack of standardized metrics for measuring women empowerment outcomes further complicates assessment of CSR program effectiveness and comparability across interventions.

Institutional barriers including weak regulatory frameworks, limited enforcement mechanisms, and inadequate policy support can undermine CSR initiatives. Velasco-Balmaseda et al. (2024) note the dispersion and lack of uniformity in gender equality standards, creating challenges for corporations seeking to implement evidence-based interventions. The absence of mandatory gender-specific CSR reporting in many jurisdictions limits accountability and transparency.

**Table 3: Challenges and Recommended Strategies for CSR-driven Women Empowerment**

Challenge Category	Specific Barriers	Recommended Strategies
Cultural Barriers	Gender norms, family constraints, community resistance	Community engagement, awareness programs, male ally involvement
Implementation Gaps	Limited funding, weak M&E, sustainability concerns	Long-term planning, robust impact assessment, stakeholder partnerships
Institutional Constraints	Weak regulations, limited enforcement, policy gaps	Policy advocacy, industry collaboration, standardization efforts
Measurement Issues	Lack of standardized metrics, attribution challenges	Develop unified frameworks, longitudinal studies, mixed methods

*Source: Compiled from literature analysis*

## 6. Discussion

The synthesis of literature reveals that CSR initiatives can serve as powerful mechanisms for advancing women empowerment when strategically designed and implemented. The evidence demonstrates positive relationships between CSR investments in women-focused programs and outcomes across economic, social, and educational dimensions of empowerment. However, the effectiveness of CSR interventions is contingent upon multiple factors including institutional context,

program design, implementation quality, and stakeholder engagement.

Theoretical frameworks including stakeholder theory, institutional theory, and social role theory provide complementary lenses for understanding the CSR-women empowerment nexus. Stakeholder theory emphasizes the moral and strategic imperatives for corporations to address gender inequalities affecting diverse stakeholder groups. Institutional theory illuminates how regulatory pressures, normative expectations, and cultural contexts shape corporate approaches to gender

equality. Social role theory helps explain why increasing female representation in corporate leadership may enhance organizational commitment to gender-inclusive CSR practices.

The evidence on board gender diversity suggests a positive relationship with CSR performance, though this relationship is moderated by institutional factors including cultural dimensions and regulatory environments. This finding has significant implications for corporate governance policy, suggesting that board diversity mandates may generate positive externalities for gender equality beyond the boardroom. However, the effectiveness of mandated diversity depends on creating inclusive board cultures where diverse perspectives can influence decision-making.

Financial inclusion and microfinance emerge as particularly effective CSR strategies for women's economic empowerment in developing country contexts. The evidence indicates that access to financial services combined with training and support services generates significant improvements in women's income, assets, and savings. However, critical perspectives caution against overreliance on individual economic interventions without addressing structural barriers and power inequalities.

The analysis also highlights the importance of moving beyond simplistic empowerment narratives. McCarthy's (2023) feminist critique reminds us that empowerment is better understood as a self-directed process rather than a corporate-led strategy. Effective CSR programs must respect women's agency, account for diverse experiences and identities, and work toward systemic change rather than mere accommodation within existing structures. This suggests the need for participatory approaches that center women's voices in program design and implementation.

## 7. Recommendations

### 7.1 For Corporate Practitioners

Corporations should adopt integrated approaches to gender equality that align CSR initiatives with core business strategies. This includes implementing gender-responsive policies across operations, supply chains, and community engagement activities. Companies should establish clear metrics

and targets for women empowerment outcomes and regularly report progress to stakeholders. Adoption of frameworks such as the Women's Empowerment Principles can provide structured guidance for comprehensive gender equality programs.

CSR programs should be designed with explicit attention to local contexts, cultural dynamics, and women's diverse needs and aspirations. Participatory approaches that involve women as co-designers and implementers of programs tend to generate more sustainable outcomes. Programs should combine economic interventions with support for social empowerment, including leadership development, networking opportunities, and advocacy capacity building.

### 7.2 For Policymakers

Regulatory frameworks should incorporate gender-specific CSR requirements and reporting standards. Policymakers should consider mandatory gender pay gap reporting, board diversity requirements, and supply chain due diligence provisions that address gender-based risks. Incentive mechanisms including tax benefits and preferential procurement can encourage corporate investment in women empowerment initiatives.

Government policies should facilitate public-private partnerships for women empowerment, leveraging corporate resources and expertise alongside public programs. National action plans on business and human rights should explicitly address gender dimensions and establish accountability mechanisms for corporate compliance with gender equality standards.

### 7.3 For Researchers

Future research should address several gaps identified in this review. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the sustained impacts of CSR interventions on women empowerment outcomes. Comparative research across diverse institutional contexts can illuminate how contextual factors moderate CSR effectiveness. Methodological innovations including quasi-experimental designs and mixed methods approaches can strengthen causal inference and provide deeper understanding of empowerment processes.

Research should engage critically with the concept of empowerment itself, examining whose

definitions and metrics are employed and how power dynamics shape program outcomes. Greater attention to intersectional perspectives can reveal how gender intersects with other identity dimensions to produce differentiated experiences of CSR programs. Finally, research should investigate the business case for gender equality to strengthen corporate incentives for sustained investment in women empowerment.

## 8. Conclusion

This comprehensive analysis demonstrates that Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives can serve as significant catalysts for women empowerment when strategically designed and effectively implemented. The evidence base supports positive relationships between CSR investments and women's economic, social, and educational outcomes. Board gender diversity, financial inclusion programs, skill development initiatives, and community engagement activities emerge as particularly promising intervention areas.

However, the review also underscores the complexity of the CSR-women empowerment nexus. Contextual factors including institutional environments, cultural norms, and sectoral characteristics significantly moderate intervention effectiveness. Critical perspectives remind us that empowerment cannot be simply delivered by corporations but must be understood as a process of self-directed transformation supported by enabling conditions and resources.

Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality requires concerted action from all stakeholders including corporations, governments, civil society, and women themselves. CSR offers a powerful mechanism through which corporations can contribute to this collective effort, generating shared value for business and society. By aligning business interests with gender equality imperatives, corporations can play a transformative role in creating more equitable and sustainable futures.

The path forward requires continued investment in evidence-based CSR programs, supportive regulatory frameworks, cross-sector partnerships, and ongoing research to advance understanding of what works in empowering women. As corporations increasingly recognize that gender equality is not merely a moral imperative but also a business

opportunity, the potential for CSR to drive meaningful progress toward women empowerment will continue to expand.

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