Journal of Management & Public Policy
Vol. 17, No. 3, March 2026 Pp. 1-7
ISSN 0976-0148 (Online) 0976-013X (Print)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47914/jmpp.2026.v17i3.001

Editorial

Impact of Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) on Women's Empowerment in India: A Critical Analysis

Amiya Kumar Mohapatra[*]

ABSTRACT

Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) provides a robust transformative architecture of welfare in Indian socio-economic milieu. DBT has removed the structural barriers that prevented welfare schemes from reaching bona fide beneficiaries due to multi-layered corruption and leakages in the development pathways. This article provides a critique of how DBT has helped in improving the quality of life of women; and empowered them to take up leadership roles in socio-economic spheres of the community. Abilities of women have improved phenomenally due to their newfound confidence owing to cash in hand for household expenditures and needs. DBT has brought them to the centre stage of decision-making in the family, including agency and reproductive choices. DBT has emerged as a formidable tool of women's emancipation in traditional patriarchal society. The article also examines the structural weaknesses in implementing DBT and the way forward. The article is useful for academics, researchers, public policy experts, as well as social and political activists.

KEYWORDS: Poverty, Social Development, Economic Development, Direct Benefit Transfer, Women's Empowerment, India

---

[*] Professor & Dean (Research), Jaipuria Institute of Management, Indore, India

E-mail: amiyaresearch125@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Several studies across the globe have suggested a distinct linkage between DBT and women's empowerment (Plagerson & Ulriksen, 2015; Alcázar et al., 2016; Ambler et al., 2017; Corona & Gammage, 2017; Kinyondo & Magashi, 2019; Waqas & Awan, 2019; Heaton et al., 2024; Mwanache, 2025; Mhatre, 2026; Sarfraz, 2026). Hence, it is imperative to examine the impact of DBT on women's empowerment in Indian context. Welfare model in India has shifted from benefits in kind to direct benefit transfer. Has DBT made any difference in the quality of life of women? Have women become empowered on the ground? Are they facing any issue in leveraging DBT for their economic independence and furthering their prosperity? It is high time we started reflecting on these questions.

True, poverty alleviation has always been a top priority for the Government of India. For long, welfare measures for eradicating poverty revolved around providing benefits in kind like foodgrains, fuel, agricultural input such as seeds, fertilizers, etc. However, despite plethora of government sponsored schemes, the incidence of poverty kept increasing rapidly. Impact of in-kind benefits was largely limited by bureaucratic tangle, corruption across all levels, leakages, and ignorance of the beneficiaries who were always at the receiving end. Female beneficiaries often received discriminatory dealings in the distribution of in-kind relief aimed at eradication of poverty in the society. Distribution of in-kind welfare materials were channelized through traditional pathways which were characteristically requisitioned by male functionaries, which in turn, strengthened patriarchy and inadvertently diluted economic, health, and nutritional benefits meant for women and children. As such, women faced issues in reclaiming their entitlements in the overall welfare agenda of the government which required their physical presence at the distribution centres, prohibitive distance between homes and distribution centres, and above all, negotiating with predominantly male state actors and local distributors.

However, scenario changed after emergence of a robust public digital infrastructure (DPI) ecosystem in the country. DPI enabled the government to pioneer DBT through use of cryptographic biometric identification system based on Aadhar, low-cost transactional banking infrastructure, and widespread telecommunication networks in the country. Jan Dhan Yojana helped in bringing the potential beneficiaries to formal banking ambit. Access to mobile phones proved to be a game changer in empowering the poor, especially the vulnerable women. Thus, Jan Dhan Yojana, Aadhar and Mobile phones laid the foundation for effective implementation of DBT. It has been observed that DBT helped the government reduce fiscal losses by eliminating supply networks for in-kind benefits, ghost beneficiaries, procedural leakages, and corruption (Kumar, 2025). While DBT is gender-neutral, it helped women claim their entitlements like never before. Further, cash in hand allowed female beneficiaries to spend on children's education, health, nutrition, and overall improvement in the household (Bakhtiar et al., 2022, Banerjee & Sen, 2024). DBT bypassed the male actors with the family to provide a decision-making pivot to women who were traditionally relegated to play the second fiddle without having any say in the family matters.

While it is true that DBT cannot mechanically usher independence and empowerment among women (Simon, 2019), it prepares women to negotiate with their male counterparts within the family, exercise material access, and indulge in psychological self-determination. Cash in hand provides them with confidence to challenge the patriarchal controls and orthodox outlook prevalent in the traditional families. Furthermore, cash in hand also allows women to have access to and control over materials and social assets, develop capabilities to participate in decision making within family as equal partners, and pursue their interest such as financial independence, personal safety from domestic violence, and personal choices by leveraging agency and resources. It is still possible that male in the family can seize the benefits accrued to women by keeping them in the state of subjugation unless they come forward to exercise agency. However, women are at the fore front of self-help group mobilization and taking up leadership roles in local panchayats. Hence, there are several role models in every community to inspire and motivate women to break the glass ceiling within family and pursue their dreams independently. DBT has provided women with wings to fly high in the sky without any inhibitions. DBT-induced women's empowerment has also helped in economic development of the country (Deepak & Tertilt, 2019). Table 1 provides a summary view of how DBT has contributed towards empowerment of women in India.

Table 1: Impact of DBT on Women's Empowerment in India: A Summary View

Dimensions of Empowerment	Impact accrued from DBT	Manifestation of Impact
Financial Inclusion	Automated account creation, transition from informal cash handling to formal banking systems	High incidence of women account holders in Indian banks

Intra-household Leverage	Increased bargaining power in household decisions, access to resources, negotiating as equal partner	Increased discretionary spending
Reproductive Autonomy	Direct financing of healthcare, independent purchasing power for family planning	High incidence of adoption of modern contraceptives, Enhanced healthcare access
Psychological Wellbeing	Access to digital resources, Decrease in domestic conflicts over use of financial resources	Reduced incidence of domestic violence

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF DBT

The government of India has launched several schemes aimed at socio-economic development of women such as Prime Minister Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY), Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP), Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY), Mahila Coir Yojana, Udyogini Scheme, SIDBI – Women Entrepreneur Fund, Swayamsiddha Scheme, New Swarnima Scheme for Women, Mahila Samridhi Yojana (MSY), Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP), Nai Roshni Scheme, etc. These schemes help women in the following ways:

Reduced Incidence of Domestic Violence

DBT has resulted in reduced incidence of domestic violence in rural India. DBT has provided unique safety net to women. Family conflicts are generally attributed to financial constraints. DBT has resolved the issue by providing cash in the hands of women which takes care of food security and basic survival needs. Further, DBT has provided women with bargaining power in the intra-family conflicts. They are now financially independent and capable of reaching out to local bodies for intervention in case their male counterparts indulge in domestic violence. They now have an upper hand even in the matters revolving around reproductive choices which are often a source of conflict within the family (Laszlo et al., 2024).

Amalgamation of Identity and Financial Independence

DBT has helped in integrating women's identity with their financial independence. Paper-based identity markers were amenable to be forged and subsequently misused by dominating male members in the family. However, biometric identity verification has made counterfeit impossible. Besides, DBT has also eliminated the need for them to negotiate with rent-seeking male bureaucrats or representatives of local bodies.

Grassroots-Level Leadership Through Self-Helf Groups

DBT has stimulated phenomenal growth of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in rural India. Financial independence has encouraged large number of women to join SHGs and contribute their share in economic development of the nation. SHGs also provide leadership opportunities to women. Leadership roles within SHGs help them in improving their self-concept which is crucial for women's empowerment in the long run. SHGs supplement DBT through structured and reliable micro-credit lines accessible to all members without any prejudice (Pradhan et al., 2023).

STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS

It is important to recognize and address the economic, normative and social barriers faced by women in accessing DBT and having control over their accounts (Sabherwal et al., 2019). While DBT has been made gender neutral, universal access to mobile phones for women is still a distant dream. Many times, women use their husbands' mobile phones to access the female-centric DBT. In such scenario, the agency is lost and the male counterparts can easily seize the material gains from DBT. Further, it has been observed that women are wanting in financial literacy as compared to their male counterparts. Rural banks can address the issue by onboarding and sensitizing *Bank Sakhi* to provide door-step banking services to female account holders. Banks can also collaborate with SHGs to provide financial literacy training.

CONCLUSION

DBT has transformed the government-sponsored welfare mechanism. Millions of marginalized women have been brought to mainstream through digital DBT facilitated by biometric identification, universal access to banking through Jan Dhan Yojana, and telecommunication revolution in the country which has made it possible for the poor to hold mobile phones with data packs in their hands irrespective of their location. DBT has empowered women through reduced incidence of domestic violence, amalgamation of digital identity and financial independence, and grassroots level leadership opportunities and supplemental micro-credit lines through SHGs. However, the government needs to look at the privacy issues in disbursement of digital DBT. Besides, it is imperative that the banks in collaboration with SHGs provide regular training in financial literacy to women. The country can boost its GDP by empowering women through DBT; and turn the welfare schemes into vehicles of socio-economic development.

REFERENCES

Alcázar, L., Balarin, M., & Espinoza Iglesias, K. H. (2016). Impacts of the Peruvian conditional cash transfer program on women's empowerment: A quantitative and qualitative approach.

Ambler, K., Ambler, K., & De Brauw, A. (2017). The impacts of cash transfers on women's empowerment: Learning from Pakistan's BISP program.

Bakhtiar, M. M., Fafchamps, M., Goldstein, M., Leonard, K. L., & Papineni, S. (2022). *Women's empowerment and the intrinsic demand for agency: Experimental evidence from Nigeria* (No. w30789). National Bureau of Economic Research.

Banerjee, S., & Sen, G. (2024). Persistent effects of a conditional cash transfer: a case of empowering women through Kanyashree in India. *Journal of Population Economics*, *37*(4), 66.

Corona, M. E. O., & Gammage, S. (2017). *Cash transfer programmes, poverty reduction and women's economic empowerment: Experience from Mexico*. ILO.

Doepke, M., & Tertilt, M. (2019). Does female empowerment promote economic development?. *Journal of Economic Growth*, *24*(4), 309-343.

Heaton, C., Kashif, A., & Mukhopadhaya, P. (2024). Unconditional cash transfer programs and women's empowerment: evidence from Pakistan. *Empirical Economics*, *67*(6), 2865-2892.

Kinyondo, A. A., & Magashi, J. (2019). The impact of cash transfers on women's empowerment: the case of the Tanzania social action fund. *Poverty & Public Policy*, *11*(3), 178-204.

Kumar, B. R. (2024). Digital India: Assessing its impact and effectiveness on economic growth and inclusion. *Unified Visions*, 73.

Laszlo, S., Majid, M. F., & Renée, L. (2024). Conditional cash transfers and women's reproductive choices. *Health Economics*, *33*(2).

Mhatre, P. U. (2026). Impact Of Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana On Womens Economic Empowerment of Panvel Region, In Maharashtra.

Mwanache, S. C. (2025). *The Contribution of Conditional Cash Transfer on Women's Empowerment: A Case of TASAF in Mtwara-Mikindani Municipality* (Doctoral dissertation, The Open University of Tanzania).

Plagerson, S., & Ulriksen, M. S. (2015). Cash transfer programmes, poverty reduction and empowerment of women in South Africa.

Pradhan, M. R., Unisa, S., Rawat, R., Surabhi, S., Saraswat, A., RS, R., & Sethi, V. (2023). Women empowerment through involvement in community-based health and nutrition interventions: Evidence from a qualitative study in India. *Plos One*, *18*(4).

Sabherwal, R., Sharma, D., & Trivedi, N. (2019). Using direct benefit transfers to transfer benefits to women: a perspective from India. *Development in Practice*, *29*(8), 1001-1013.

Sarfraz, M. (2026). A qualitative evaluation of the impact of cash transfer programs on women's empowerment. *Quality & Quantity*, 1-21.

Simon, C. A. (2019). *The effect of cash-based interventions on gender outcomes in development and humanitarian settings*. UN.

Waqas, M., & Awan, M. S. (2019). Do cash transfers effect women empowerment? Evidence from Benazir Income Support Program of Pakistan. *Women's Studies*, *48*(7), 777-792.