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Women's property rights as a mark of empowerment

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Abstract

Women's property rights represent a decisive step toward dismantling patriarchal structures and advancing gender justice. Ownership and control over property provide women with economic security, social dignity, and legal autonomy. In India, the historical exclusion of women from coparcenary rights under Hindu law reflected deep-rooted inequality. Legislative reforms particularly the *Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005* along with progressive judicial pronouncements, have redefined women's inheritance rights by recognizing daughters as equal coparceners by birth. These reforms align personal law with constitutional mandates of equality under *Articles 14* and *15*, and international commitments such as *CEDAW* and the Sustainable Development Goals. However, practical challenges remain: social resistance, misuse of oral partition claims, exclusion of tribal women under *Section 2(2)* of the Act, and gaps in implementation. This study explores women's property rights as a marker of empowerment, examining their economic, social, and legal implications. It evaluates recent case law and policy developments while suggesting reforms to ensure that formal rights translate into substantive empowerment for women in India.

Keywords: Women's property rights, gender justice, Hindu Succession Act 2005

Introduction

Property has always been more than an economic asset; it is a source of security, social standing, and autonomy. For women, ownership and control over property mark a decisive step toward empowerment, as it reduces dependence, enhances bargaining power within the family, and affirms equality in society. In patriarchal traditions, women were historically excluded from property inheritance, relegated to maintenance or dowry-based entitlements. This economic disempowerment reinforced social subordination.

The modern recognition of women's property rights especially the right to inherit ancestral property as a coparcener reflects a fundamental shift from dependency to equality. Landmark reforms such as the *Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005*, and its judicial interpretation by the Supreme Court in *Vineeta Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma* (2020) have established that daughters are equal coparceners by birth, entitled to the same share as sons. This legal recognition is not merely about ownership; it signifies the dismantling of centuries-old patriarchal barriers.

Objectives

1. To trace the historical evolution of women's property rights in India and situate them within the framework of patriarchy and social exclusion.
2. To analyze constitutional, statutory, and judicial developments that have redefined women's rights in ancestral property, with emphasis on the 2005 Amendment and subsequent case law.
3. To examine how property ownership contributes to women's empowerment in economic, social, and legal dimensions.
4. To identify contemporary challenges in the realization of these rights, including social barriers, procedural obstacles, and statutory exclusions (such as those affecting tribal women).
5. To propose legal, policy, and social measures for strengthening women's property rights and ensuring gender-equitable outcomes.

Methodology

This study adopts a socio-legal research methodology, combining doctrinal analysis with contextual examination:

Doctrinal Analysis

- Review of statutory provisions under the *Hindu Succession Act*, 1956 and its 2005 Amendment.
- Examination of leading judicial pronouncements (*Vineeta Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma* (2020), *Arunachala Gounder v. Ponnusamy* (2022), *Sujata Sharma v. Manu Gupta* (2016), and recent High Court cases).
- Comparative analysis of Indian law with international norms such as CEDAW and SDG Commitments.

Socio-Legal Contextual Study

- Analysis of empirical research and field studies on women's property ownership patterns in India.
- Consideration of socio-cultural practices (oral partitions, family pressure to relinquish shares) that impact enforcement.
- Review of policy reports and government schemes linking women's property ownership to economic empowerment.

Analytical Approach

- Evaluating women's property rights as a means of empowerment through three lenses: economic independence, social dignity, and legal equality.
- Identifying implementation gaps and suggesting reforms in law, policy, and social practices.

Women's property rights thus serve as a marker of empowerment in three dimensions

1. **Economic Empowerment:** Granting women financial independence, access to credit, and ability to participate in productive activities.
2. **Social Empowerment:** Enhancing women's status within the household and community by ensuring equal recognition as heirs and decision-makers.
3. **Legal Empowerment:** Reinforcing constitutional guarantees of equality (*Articles 14 and 15*), enabling women to seek justice against discriminatory practices.

In this sense, women's property rights are not just a private legal entitlement but a public measure of gender justice. They bridge the gap between formal equality and substantive empowerment, aligning family law with constitutional values of dignity, equality, and non-discrimination.

Conceptual Framework

Property has historically been a symbol of power, security, and dignity. The ability to own, control, and inherit property often determines an individual's position in society, access to resources, and independence of decision-making. For women, especially in patriarchal societies like India, property rights are not merely about economics but are intrinsically linked with social status, gender equality, and empowerment. Women's exclusion from property ownership in earlier legal frameworks reflected their marginalization; conversely, their recognition as equal heirs today represents a profound stride toward empowerment and justice.

The development of women's property rights in India, particularly in the domain of coparcenary rights under the Hindu Succession Act, offers a clear lens through which to examine the relationship between law, gender, and

empowerment. These rights symbolize women's transition from dependency to autonomy and serve as a concrete measure of empowerment both within the household and in society at large.

Historical Background: Patriarchy and Property

For centuries, inheritance systems across cultures privileged men over women. Under Hindu law prior to codification, the Mitakshara coparcenary system vested property rights in male descendants by birth. Women were not considered coparceners; they were only entitled to limited maintenance rights or "Stridhana," which was often controlled by husbands or male relatives. The underlying assumption was that women would be provided for by their fathers, husbands or sons, thereby excluding them from independent ownership.

This exclusion reinforced women's subordination. Without property, women had little bargaining power in households, minimal control over resources, and no security in cases of widowhood, abandonment, or domestic violence. Thus, inequality in property rights was not just a private matter but a systemic mechanism of disempowerment.

Constitutional Framework and Early Reforms

The Indian Constitution guarantees equality before law (*Article 14*), prohibits discrimination based on sex (*Article 15*), and directs the State to adopt measures that secure equal rights for women (*Article 15(3)*, *Article 39*). However, personal laws often lagged behind constitutional ideals.

The *Hindu Succession Act*, 1956, was a landmark in codifying inheritance law but still retained gender discrimination. Sons were coparceners in joint family property by birth, while daughters were excluded. Widows and daughters could inherit but did not have equal coparcenary rights, reinforcing male dominance over ancestral property.

This anomaly led to growing criticism and advocacy for reform, supported by the women's movement, constitutional jurisprudence, and the *Directive Principles of State Policy* mandating equality.

The 2005 Amendment: A Turning Point

The *Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act*, 2005, marked a historic shift. It conferred upon daughters the same coparcenary rights as sons, declaring that daughters too are coparceners by birth, irrespective of their marital status. This meant:

1. **Equal Rights:** Daughters could demand partition, inherit ancestral property, and claim an equal share.
2. **Equal Liabilities:** Daughters also became responsible for debts and obligations of the joint family property.
3. **Wider Empowerment:** Women were now eligible to act as Karta (manager) of the Hindu Undivided Family if they were the senior-most coparcener.

This legislative reform sought to align family law with constitutional principles and to break the chain of gendered property exclusion.

Judicial Interpretation and Consolidation

The true force of the 2005 amendment was realized through judicial interpretation. Courts played a critical role in resolving ambiguities and ensuring the spirit of equality was upheld.

1. **Vineeta Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma (2020):** The Supreme Court clarified that a daughter's coparcenary right is by birth, and does not depend on whether the father was alive on the date of the 2005 amendment. This ruling cemented gender parity in coparcenary rights.
2. **Arunachala Gounder v. Ponnusamy (2022):** The Court held that self-acquired property of a Hindu male devolves by inheritance, not survivorship, and daughters have equal rights in such property.
3. **Sujata Sharma v. Manu Gupta (Delhi HC, 2016; affirmed later):** Established that daughters can be Kartas of HUF's, further dismantling patriarchal limitations.
4. **Recent High Court Rulings (2023-25):** Madras High Court has stressed that oral partition claims cannot lightly defeat daughters' rights, and Rajasthan High Court (2025) urged legislative reforms to extend property rights to tribal women excluded under *Section 2(2)* of the Act.

These cases show that the judiciary has acted as an ally of women's empowerment, interpreting the law progressively to ensure substantive equality.

Property Rights as a Dimension of Empowerment

Women's property rights are more than a legal entitlement; they directly empower women across three interrelated dimensions:

1. Economic Empowerment

- **Financial Independence:** Ownership of land or property reduces dependency on husbands or male relatives.
- **Access to Resources:** Women with property can secure bank loans, enter contracts, and participate in productive activities.
- **Wealth Redistribution:** Property inheritance helps narrow the gender wealth gap, creating intergenerational security for women and their children.

2. Social Empowerment

- **Household Negotiation Power:** A woman with property has greater say in family decisions and is less vulnerable to domestic violence or abandonment.
- **Status and Dignity:** Property ownership enhances a woman's social standing within the community, challenging patriarchal stereotypes of dependence.
- **Breaking Cultural Barriers:** Recognizing women as heirs disrupts the age-old notion of "paraya dhan" (a daughter as someone else's property).

3. Legal and Political Empowerment

- **Constitutional Equality:** Property rights operationalize *Articles 14* and *15*, reinforcing women's status as equal citizens.
- **Access to Justice:** Women's ability to claim inheritance strengthens their legal consciousness and use of courts.
- **Democratic Participation:** Economic autonomy enables greater political participation and engagement in governance.

Contemporary Challenges

Despite legislative and judicial advances, women's property rights face several challenges:

1. **Social Resistance:** Deep-rooted patriarchal norms discourage women from claiming inheritance, often under family pressure to "relinquish" their rights in favor of brothers.
2. **Oral Partition Claims:** Many families attempt to deny daughters their share by alleging past oral partitions—though courts now demand strict proof, this remains a litigation hurdle.
3. **Tribal Women's Exclusion:** *Section 2(2)* of the *Hindu Succession Act* excludes Scheduled Tribes, leaving many tribal women outside the ambit of reform. Recent judicial calls for amendment highlight the urgency of this issue.
4. **Implementation Gaps:** Procedural barriers such as mutation of land records, lack of awareness, and male dominance in village-level administration hinder effective enforcement.
5. **Economic Control:** Even when property is legally inherited, practical control often remains with male relatives, limiting women's autonomy.

Comparative and Global Perspectives

Globally, women's property rights are recognized as central to gender equality and sustainable development. The *CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women)*, ratified by India, mandates equal rights in property and inheritance. The *Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5)* explicitly emphasize women's equal access to ownership and control over land and property as a marker of empowerment.

Countries that have advanced gender-equal property rights, such as Rwanda after its land reforms, or South Africa with its constitutional guarantees to show strong correlation between women's property ownership and improvements in health, education, and poverty reduction. India's reforms, though significant, require deeper implementation to achieve similar transformative effects.

Strengthening Women's Empowerment through Property Rights

To realize the full empowering potential of women's property rights, several measures are needed:

1. **Awareness Campaigns:** Educating women about their legal rights is essential to overcome social resistance and silence.
2. **Simplified Procedures:** Streamlining land and property registration, ensuring automatic mutation, and reducing bureaucratic hurdles.
3. **Extending Rights to Tribals:** Amending *Section 2(2)* of the *Hindu Succession Act* to ensure equal rights for Scheduled Tribe women.
4. **Judicial Vigilance:** Continuing strict scrutiny of oral partition claims and ensuring gender-sensitive adjudication.
5. **Economic Integration:** Linking women's property ownership to credit facilities, entrepreneurship, and government welfare schemes.
6. **Cultural Change:** Encouraging families and communities to support daughters in exercising their rights, thus reshaping social norms.

Conclusion

Women's property rights are not merely about inheritance; they are a *litmus test of gender equality* and a cornerstone of women's empowerment. The recognition of daughters as equal coparceners has dismantled centuries of patriarchal exclusion and aligned family law with constitutional values of equality and dignity. Judicial interpretation has strengthened this framework, while contemporary debates highlight the need for inclusivity, especially for tribal women.

Property ownership grants women financial independence, social respect, and legal recognition as equal citizens. It transforms them from dependents to decision-makers, from passive recipients to active participants in society. As India continues its journey toward gender justice, ensuring that women not only have property rights on paper but also in practice will remain a defining marker of empowerment and a foundation for building a just and equal society.

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