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Tracing the Changing Status of Women in India Evidence from Three Generations and Historical Literature

Ravita¹, Pardeep Kumar Kesharwani²,

Abstract

The status of women in India has undergone considerable transformation since independence, with changes in education, health, economic participation, decision-making, social participation, legal awareness, and personal autonomy occurring at different rates across generations. The present study examined the changing status of women in India by combining evidence from historical literature with a three-generation empirical assessment. A mixed-methods approach was adopted. The historical component involved a chronological review of literature, government reports, policy documents, and other relevant sources to trace major developments in women's education, health, social and economic participation, political participation, legal rights, and empowerment from 1947 to the present. The empirical component included 300 women divided equally into three generational groups: daughters ($n = 100$), mothers ($n = 100$), and grandmothers ($n = 100$). Data were collected using the Women's Empowerment and Changing Status Questionnaire, consisting of 50 items covering ten dimensions: educational empowerment, health and well-being, economic empowerment, decision-making power, social empowerment and participation, political empowerment and awareness, legal awareness and rights, freedom of mobility and personal autonomy, family status and gender equality, and self-confidence, self-efficacy and aspirations. Descriptive statistics, frequency distributions, independent-samples t-tests, and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used for quantitative analysis. The mean overall empowerment score was highest among daughters (200.60 ± 13.79), followed by mothers (169.57 ± 16.18) and grandmothers (138.51 ± 14.57). One-way ANOVA indicated a statistically significant difference in overall empowerment among the three generations, $F(2, 297) = 435.49$, $p < .001$. The findings, together with the historical evidence, indicate substantial intergenerational differences in the dimensions associated with women's empowerment. The study provides a combined empirical and historical perspective on the changing status of women in India.

Keywords: women's empowerment, changing status of women, three generations, education, health, India, historical literature, mixed methods

1 Introduction

The status of women is an important indicator of social development because women's opportunities, rights, health, education, economic participation, and ability to participate in decision-making are closely connected with the development of families and communities. In India, the question of women's status has acquired particular importance since independence in 1947. The Constitution established equality of status and opportunity and provided a framework through which the State could adopt measures to address social and economic disadvantages affecting women. Government documentation on women's development also describes a gradual shift in policy thinking from welfare-oriented approaches towards development,

rights, participation, and empowerment.

The changing status of women cannot be understood through a single indicator. Education is one of the important foundations of empowerment because it can influence knowledge, confidence, employment opportunities, awareness of rights, and participation in social and family decisions. At the same time, health and well-being are essential components of women's quality of life. Historical government records show that education and health were among the important areas of social development addressed during the decades following independence. Later statistical evidence also demonstrates substantial changes in women's educational attainment. For example, official statistics report that female literacy increased substantially between the 1991 and 2001 Census periods and continued to rise in subsequent decades.

Women's empowerment has also involved changes in economic independence, participation in household decisions, political participation, and access to legal rights. Policy developments have progressively expanded the institutional framework surrounding women's rights and participation. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, for example, provided for reservation of seats for women in Panchayats and Municipalities, creating an important institutional pathway for women's participation in local decision-making. Similarly, the National Commission for Women was established in 1990, while subsequent legislation and policy initiatives addressed different dimensions of women's legal and social status.

The historical trajectory, however, is not simply a linear movement from disadvantage to empowerment. Improvements in one area may occur alongside continuing challenges in another. The Government of India's High Level Committee on the Status of Women specifically examined the socio-economic, health, nutritional, legal, and political status of women and emphasized the importance of examining these dimensions together. More recent national statistics similarly examine women's empowerment through indicators such as participation in household decisions, ownership of property, and access to individual bank accounts. For example, NFHS-based official statistics reported increases between NFHS-4 and NFHS-5 in women's participation in household decisions and ownership of a house or land, as well as in the proportion of women having a bank account that they themselves use.

Although national statistics and historical literature provide valuable evidence of social change, they do not always show how these broader changes are reflected across successive generations within families. A three-generation perspective provides an opportunity to examine differences between daughters, mothers, and grandmothers using the same measurement framework. Such a comparison can provide a more direct picture of intergenerational changes in education, health, economic independence, decision-making, social participation, legal awareness, mobility, family status, and self-confidence.

The present study therefore combines two complementary sources of evidence. First, historical literature was examined to trace the development of women's status and empowerment from independence to the present period. Second, primary data were collected from three generations of women using a structured women's empowerment questionnaire. The combination of historical documentary evidence and empirical intergenerational data provides a broader framework for understanding how women's status has changed over time.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

The study was conducted with the following objectives:

1. To examine the changing status of women in India from 1947 to the present through historical literature.
2. To assess the level of women's empowerment across three generations of women.
3. To compare the educational, health, economic, social, political, legal, and personal dimensions of empowerment among daughters, mothers, and grandmothers.

4. To determine whether significant differences exist in overall women's empowerment among the three generations.
5. To interpret the empirical findings in relation to the historical developments documented in the literature.

2 Methods

2.1 Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design combining historical/documentary analysis with quantitative cross-generational data. The historical component was used to trace the development of women's status and empowerment in India from 1947 to the present, while the quantitative component was used to examine differences in women's empowerment among three generations. The two sources of evidence were considered together to provide a broader understanding of changes in women's status over time.

2.2 Historical Literature Analysis

For the historical component, relevant literature relating to women's status and empowerment in India was examined chronologically from the period following independence in 1947 to the present. The literature included research articles, books, government publications, statistical reports, policy documents, committee reports, and other relevant documentary sources. Particular attention was given to developments in women's education, health and well-being, economic participation, social participation, political participation, legal rights, decision-making, mobility, and gender equality.

The historical evidence was organized around major periods of social and policy development rather than treating women's empowerment as a single outcome. Government sources were particularly useful for documenting changes in policy priorities and measurable indicators. For example, official historical material describes the constitutional basis of women's equality and the development of women-focused planning and programmes after independence. Later policy documents describe the movement towards a more rights- and empowerment-oriented approach, while contemporary statistical reports provide indicators of women's participation in household decisions, asset ownership, financial inclusion, education, and other areas.

2.3 Participants

The empirical component of the study included 300 women, equally distributed among three generational groups. The sample consisted of 100 daughters, 100 mothers, and 100 grandmothers. The mean ages of the daughter, mother, and grandmother groups were approximately 23.93 ± 3.96 years, 44.26 ± 6.29 years, and 69.99 ± 7.04 years, respectively. The three-generation structure was adopted to facilitate direct comparison of women's empowerment using the same measurement framework.

2.4 Tool Used for Data Collection

Data were collected using the Women's Empowerment and Changing Status Questionnaire (WECSQ). The questionnaire consisted of 50 statements distributed across ten dimensions of women's empowerment: educational empowerment, health and well-being, economic empowerment, decision-making power, social empowerment and participation, political empowerment and awareness, legal awareness and rights, freedom of mobility and personal autonomy, family status and gender equality, and self-confidence, self-efficacy and aspirations.

Each statement was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5

= Strongly Agree. Thus, the total empowerment score could range from 50 to 250, with higher scores indicating a higher level of reported empowerment. In addition to the 50-item scale, demographic and background information was collected, including age, residence, education, occupation, employment status, marital status, age at marriage, number of children, and family characteristics. Historical and factual indicators relating to education, healthcare, employment, voting, property ownership, mobility, family decision-making, and awareness of women's rights were also included.

2.5 Variables of the Study

The principal independent variable was generation, consisting of daughters, mothers, and grandmothers. The principal dependent variable was women's empowerment, measured through the overall questionnaire score. The ten dimensions of empowerment served as specific outcome variables: educational empowerment; health and well-being; economic empowerment; decision-making power; social empowerment and participation; political empowerment and awareness; legal awareness and rights; freedom of mobility and personal autonomy; family status and gender equality; and self-confidence, self-efficacy and aspirations.

2.6 Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire data were organized and analyzed quantitatively. Frequency and percentage distributions were used to summarize categorical and demographic characteristics. Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, were calculated for the overall empowerment score and the ten dimensions of empowerment.

$$\bar{X} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n X_i}{n} \quad (1)$$

$$SD = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{i=1}^n (X_i - \bar{X})^2}{n - 1}} \quad (2)$$

$$P = \frac{f}{N} \times 100 \quad (3)$$

$$t = \frac{\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2}{\sqrt{s_p^2 \left(\frac{1}{n_1} + \frac{1}{n_2} \right)}} \quad (4)$$

$$F = \frac{MS_{\text{between}}}{MS_{\text{within}}} \quad (5)$$

For comparisons involving two groups, an independent-samples t-test was used where applicable. To compare the three generational groups, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used. The statistical significance level was set at $p < .05$. The quantitative findings were subsequently interpreted alongside the historical evidence obtained from the literature in order to identify broader patterns of change in women's status across generations and over the historical period under study.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

Participation in the empirical component was voluntary, and the information obtained from participants was treated as confidential and used only for academic purposes. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and were given the opportunity to provide responses based on their own experiences. The data were analyzed in aggregate form so that

individual participants could not be identified in the presentation of the findings.

3 Results

Table 1: Dimension-Wise Women's Empowerment Scores Across Three Generations

Dimension	Daughter		Mother		Grandmother	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Educational Empowerment	19.93	2.09	16.94	2.11	13.71	1.99
Health and Well-being	20.00	2.13	17.29	2.25	14.05	2.07
Economic Empowerment	20.01	2.21	16.78	2.44	13.89	2.41
Decision-Making Power	19.90	2.25	16.73	2.31	13.97	1.90
Social Empowerment and Participation	20.13	2.26	16.97	2.16	13.77	2.12
Political Empowerment and Awareness	20.12	2.25	17.08	2.50	13.93	2.28
Legal Awareness and Rights	20.05	2.00	16.93	2.46	13.96	2.12
Mobility and Personal Autonomy	20.08	2.00	17.02	2.41	14.00	2.12
Family Status and Gender Equality	19.99	1.95	16.80	2.49	13.71	2.51
Self-Confidence, Self-Efficacy and Aspirations	20.39	2.07	17.03	2.38	13.52	2.29

Note. SD = Standard Deviation. Each dimension consisted of five items, with a possible score ranging from 5 to 25.

Table 1 presents the overall women's empowerment scores across the three generations. The findings show a clear difference in the level of empowerment among daughters, mothers, and grandmothers. Daughters obtained the highest mean empowerment score (200.60 ± 13.79), followed by mothers (169.57 ± 16.18), while grandmothers recorded the lowest mean score (138.51 ± 14.57). This pattern indicates that the younger generation reported greater levels of empowerment than the older generations. The relatively smaller standard deviations in all three groups suggest that the scores were reasonably concentrated around their respective group means. Overall, the descriptive findings indicate a progressive change in women's empowerment across generations, with daughters reporting substantially greater empowerment than mothers and grandmothers.

Table 2: Overall Women's Empowerment Scores Across Three Generations

Generation	N	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Daughter	100	200.60	13.79	170	238
Mother	100	169.57	16.18	130	210
Grandmother	100	138.51	14.57	106	169

Table 2 presents the mean and standard deviation of the ten dimensions of women's empowerment across the three generations. A similar generational pattern was observed across all dimensions. Daughters consistently recorded higher mean scores than mothers and grandmothers in educational empowerment, health and well-being, economic empowerment, decision-making, social participation, political awareness, legal awareness, mobility and personal autonomy, family status and gender equality, and self-confidence and aspirations. Among daughters, the dimension scores were relatively close to one another, ranging from approximately 19.90 to 20.39, indicating a consistently high level of empowerment across the measured domains.

Mothers showed intermediate scores, whereas grandmothers recorded comparatively lower scores across all ten dimensions. The results suggest that the generational differences were not restricted to a single aspect of women's lives but were evident across educational, economic, social, political, legal, family, and personal dimensions. The findings therefore provide descriptive evidence of broad intergenerational changes in women's empowerment.

Table 3: One-Way ANOVA of Overall Women's Empowerment Across Three Generations

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Between Groups	2	435.49	< .001	0.746

Note. η^2 = eta squared. The analysis included daughters, mothers, and grandmothers ($N = 300$).

Table 3 presents the results of the one-way analysis of variance conducted to examine differences in overall women's empowerment among daughters, mothers, and grandmothers. The obtained F-value of 435.49 was statistically significant at $p < .001$, indicating that the mean empowerment scores were not the same across the three generations. The effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.746$) indicates that a substantial proportion of the variation in overall empowerment scores was associated with differences between the generational groups. Thus, the descriptive differences observed in Table 1 were supported by the inferential analysis. However, ANOVA alone does not identify which specific groups differ from one another; pairwise comparisons are therefore considered in Table 5.

Table 4: One-Way ANOVA of Women's Empowerment Dimensions Across Three Generations

Dimension	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Educational Empowerment	226.88	< .001	0.604
Health and Well-being	191.63	< .001	0.563
Economic Empowerment	168.72	< .001	0.532
Decision-Making Power	188.19	< .001	0.559
Social Empowerment and Participation	213.02	< .001	0.589
Political Empowerment and Awareness	173.87	< .001	0.539
Legal Awareness and Rights	191.13	< .001	0.563
Mobility and Personal Autonomy	193.66	< .001	0.566
Family Status and Gender Equality	181.72	< .001	0.550
Self-Confidence, Self-Efficacy and Aspirations	233.09	< .001	0.611

Note. *F* = one-way analysis of variance statistic; η^2 = eta squared. All dimensions showed statistically significant differences among the three generations at $p < .001$.

Table 4 presents the one-way ANOVA results for the ten individual dimensions of women's empowerment. Statistically significant differences were observed across all ten dimensions, with all p-values below .001. The F-values ranged from 168.72 for economic empowerment to 233.09 for self-confidence, self-efficacy and aspirations, indicating statistically significant generational variation in each dimension. The effect sizes also indicate substantial between-generation differences, with η^2 values ranging from 0.532 to 0.611. The largest effect was observed for self-confidence, self-efficacy and aspirations ($\eta^2 = 0.611$), followed by educational empowerment ($\eta^2 = 0.604$), whereas economic empowerment showed the comparatively smallest effect (η^2

= 0.532). Importantly, even the smallest effect represents considerable variation among the three groups. These findings suggest that the observed generational differences in overall empowerment were reflected consistently across the individual dimensions examined in the study.

Table 5: Pairwise Comparisons of Overall Women's Empowerment

Comparison	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Significance
Daughter vs. Mother	14.60	< .001	Significant
Daughter vs. Grandmother	30.96	< .001	Significant
Mother vs. Grandmother	14.27	< .001	Significant

Table 6: Effect Sizes for Differences in Women's Empowerment

Dimension	η^2
Educational Empowerment	0.604
Health and Well-being	0.563
Economic Empowerment	0.532
Decision-Making Power	0.559
Social Empowerment and Participation	0.589
Political Empowerment and Awareness	0.539
Legal Awareness and Rights	0.563
Mobility and Personal Autonomy	0.566
Family Status and Gender Equality	0.550
Self-Confidence, Self-Efficacy and Aspirations	0.611
Overall Empowerment	0.746

Table 5 presents the pairwise comparisons of overall women's empowerment between the three generations. The comparison between daughters and mothers produced a statistically significant t-value ($t = 14.60$, $p < .001$). A statistically significant difference was also observed between daughters and grandmothers ($t = 30.96$, $p < .001$), while mothers and grandmothers also differed significantly ($t = 14.27$, $p < .001$). In each comparison, the direction of the difference was consistent with the descriptive results presented in Table 1: daughters had higher empowerment scores than mothers, and mothers had higher scores than grandmothers. Thus, the significant ANOVA result was accompanied by significant differences in each of the three generation-to-generation comparisons.

Table 6 summarizes the effect sizes obtained for the ten dimensions and the overall empowerment score. The η^2 values indicate that the differences among the three generations accounted for a substantial proportion of the variability in empowerment scores. The overall empowerment score had an η^2 of 0.746, while the individual dimensions ranged from 0.532 to 0.611. The highest effect size was found for self-confidence, self-efficacy and aspirations, whereas economic empowerment had the lowest effect size among the ten dimensions. The results indicate that generational differences were evident across all measured dimensions rather than being confined to one particular aspect of women's empowerment.

4 Discussion

The present study examined the changing status of women in India by combining historical literature with empirical evidence from three generations of women—daughters, mothers, and grandmothers. The quantitative findings showed a clear intergenerational pattern in the present sample. Daughters recorded the highest overall empowerment score, followed by mothers and grandmothers. The mean scores were 200.60 for daughters, 169.57 for mothers, and 138.51 for grandmothers. The one-way ANOVA further indicated a statistically significant difference among the three generations, $F(2, 297) = 435.49$, $p < .001$. These findings suggest that the experiences and opportunities associated with women's empowerment differ substantially across generations.

The higher empowerment scores observed among daughters can be understood in the context of the broader social and institutional changes that have taken place in India over the past several decades. The expansion of educational opportunities, greater access to information and communication technologies, increased awareness of legal rights, changing attitudes towards women's employment, and greater emphasis on women's participation in decision-making have created circumstances that differ considerably from those experienced by earlier generations. Contemporary government programmes explicitly frame women's empowerment in terms of safety, security, access to services, participation, capacity building, and equality. For example, Mission Shakti identifies women's holistic development and empowerment as a major policy objective and includes interventions related to economic and social empowerment, institutional support, and participation in local governance.

The findings for educational empowerment are particularly relevant to the historical context of the study. Daughters recorded a substantially higher mean score than mothers and grandmothers, suggesting that educational opportunities and educational awareness may have expanded across generations. Education is not only an indicator of women's status but can also provide access to employment, information, legal awareness, and greater participation in family and social decisions. The generational difference observed in the present study is therefore consistent with the broader historical movement towards increasing educational opportunities for girls and women in India. However, the present cross-sectional comparison should not be interpreted as demonstrating that education alone caused the observed increase in empowerment.

A similar pattern was found for health and well-being. Daughters reported higher scores than the two older generations. This may reflect changes in awareness of women's health, availability of health services, reproductive health information, and women's ability to participate in decisions concerning their own health. Contemporary national statistics demonstrate that women's empowerment is increasingly assessed alongside health and household decision-making indicators rather than through education alone. The NFHS-5-based official statistics, for example, report that 71

The results for economic empowerment also showed a clear difference between generations. Daughters had a higher mean score than mothers, while mothers scored higher than grandmothers. Economic empowerment is closely connected with women's ability to access and control financial resources, participate in paid work, own assets, and contribute to household economic decisions. National evidence indicates considerable change in these areas. Between NFHS-4 and NFHS-5, the proportion of women owning a house and/or land alone or jointly increased from 38.4

The decision-making dimension showed the same generational pattern. Daughters obtained higher scores than mothers and grandmothers, indicating greater reported involvement in decisions affecting their lives and families. This is an important aspect of empowerment because access to education or income does not necessarily translate automatically into control over decisions. Official NFHS indicators similarly recognize participation in decisions about

women's own healthcare, major household purchases, and visits to family or relatives as important measures of women's empowerment. The present findings therefore support the value of examining empowerment as a multidimensional concept rather than relying on a single socioeconomic indicator.

The findings related to social empowerment and participation, political empowerment and awareness, and legal awareness and rights also showed significant differences across the three generations. These differences may reflect the gradual expansion of women's exposure to formal institutions, mass media, education, digital information, government programmes, and legal awareness initiatives. The institutional framework for women's development has also expanded over time. The Ministry of Women and Child Development currently describes its role as addressing gaps in state action for women and promoting gender-equitable legislation, policies, and programmes. This broader institutional environment provides an important context for understanding why younger women may report greater awareness of rights and greater participation than women from earlier generations.

An important finding was the difference in mobility and personal autonomy. Daughters recorded higher scores than mothers and grandmothers, suggesting generational changes in women's perceived freedom to make personal choices and move within social and public spaces. Changes in education, employment, transportation, communication technology, and social attitudes may contribute to such differences. At the same time, mobility and autonomy remain influenced by family, cultural, economic, and community conditions. Therefore, the higher score among daughters should be understood as evidence of a generational difference within the study sample rather than evidence that restrictions on women's autonomy have disappeared.

The family status and gender equality dimension also demonstrated significant generational differences. The higher scores among daughters suggest that younger women may experience comparatively greater acceptance of gender equality within family relationships. This finding is relevant to the broader transformation of gender roles in India, where women's education, employment, financial inclusion, and participation in household decisions have increasingly become part of discussions surrounding family development and gender equality. Nevertheless, differences between generations should not be interpreted as uniform across all Indian families because women's experiences continue to vary according to socioeconomic circumstances, location, education, family structure, and other contextual factors.

The largest effect size among the ten dimensions was observed for self-confidence, self-efficacy and aspirations ($\eta^2 = 0.611$), while the overall empowerment score produced an η^2 of 0.746. This suggests that the generational differences observed in the study extend beyond material opportunities and institutional access to women's perceptions of their own capabilities and aspirations. Younger women may have greater exposure to educational and occupational opportunities, digital communication, role models, and information than earlier generations. However, because the study is based on cross-sectional comparisons of three age-defined groups, it cannot establish that the generation itself caused these differences. Age, period effects, cohort experiences, and differences in life circumstances may all contribute to the observed pattern.

The historical literature provides an important explanation for interpreting these intergenerational differences. Since independence, India's approach towards women has progressively incorporated education, health, development, rights, participation, safety, and empowerment. Contemporary policy has moved further towards an integrated and life-cycle approach. Mission Shakti, for instance, brings together interventions relating to women's safety, security, services, capacity building, participation, and empowerment. The present study's finding that daughters consistently scored higher than mothers and grandmothers across the ten dimensions is therefore broadly consistent with the direction of institutional and social change

documented in the literature.

At the same time, the findings should not be interpreted as indicating that the process of women's empowerment is complete. National data continue to show differences across states, rural and urban areas, and socioeconomic groups. For example, NFHS-5 reported differences in women's participation in household decisions between rural and urban women, and substantial state-level variation in the same indicator. Thus, intergenerational improvement should be understood as a broad pattern rather than a uniform experience shared by all women.

The strength of the present study lies in its attempt to connect historical change with lived generational differences. Historical literature provides the wider social and policy context, whereas the questionnaire provides empirical evidence from three generations using the same ten-dimensional framework. The convergence of these two forms of evidence suggests that women's empowerment in India has developed across multiple areas, including education, health, economic participation, decision-making, social and political awareness, legal rights, autonomy, family relationships, and personal confidence.

Overall, the findings indicate a substantial intergenerational transformation in women's empowerment within the study sample. The consistently higher scores among daughters, intermediate scores among mothers, and lower scores among grandmothers suggest that younger generations have experienced a different set of educational, social, economic, legal, and personal opportunities from those available to earlier generations. The historical evidence provides a broader context for this pattern, showing that women's empowerment has increasingly become a central component of India's development and policy framework. Nevertheless, the findings also highlight the need to view women's empowerment as a continuing, multidimensional process rather than as a completed historical transition.

5 Conclusions

The present study examined the changing status of women in India by bringing together historical evidence from the literature and empirical evidence from three generations of women daughters, mothers, and grandmothers. The findings indicate a clear pattern of intergenerational differences in women's empowerment. Daughters reported the highest overall empowerment scores, followed by mothers and grandmothers, and statistically significant differences were observed among the three generations. Similar differences were found across all ten dimensions examined in the study, including education, health and well-being, economic empowerment, decision-making, social participation, political awareness, legal awareness, mobility and personal autonomy, family status and gender equality, and self-confidence and aspirations.

The findings suggest that the changing status of women in India has been multidimensional rather than limited to improvements in a single area. The historical review indicates that, since independence, greater attention has progressively been given to women's education, health, economic participation, legal rights, political participation, and social empowerment. The higher empowerment scores observed among the younger generation are broadly consistent with these long-term changes in social conditions, public policy, educational opportunities, and awareness of women's rights.

Thus, the study concludes that the changing status of women in India can be understood most effectively by examining both historical transformation and intergenerational experiences. The three-generation approach provides a useful perspective for understanding how opportunities and perceptions of empowerment have changed over time, while the historical literature places these generational differences within the broader development of Indian society since 1947.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest associated with this article.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

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