

Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women in India (SDG 5)

***Kunji Lal Meena**

Abstract

Gender equality and women's empowerment are central to achieving inclusive and sustainable development in India. Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG-5) aims to eliminate discrimination, ensure equal opportunities, and promote the full participation of women in social, economic, and political life. In India, despite constitutional guarantees and progressive laws, women continue to face challenges such as gender-based violence, unequal access to education and health, wage gaps, and limited decision-making power. However, significant progress has been made through government initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Self-Help Groups, political reservation in local governance, and expanding financial inclusion. Education, skill development, and digital access have emerged as key drivers of empowerment, enabling women to participate actively in the workforce and entrepreneurship. Achieving SDG-5 requires addressing deep-rooted patriarchal norms, strengthening legal enforcement, and ensuring inclusive policies for marginalized women. Empowered women contribute not only to gender justice but also to economic growth, social cohesion, and national development, making gender equality a critical priority for India's sustainable future.

Keywords: Gender equality, SDG-5, BBBP, Start-Up India, gender-responsive budgeting, Wage gaps.

I. Introduction

Gender equality and women's empowerment are fundamental principles of human rights and essential prerequisites for sustainable development. Gender equality refers to the condition in which women and men enjoy equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities in all spheres of life, while women's empowerment focuses on enhancing women's ability to make strategic life choices, access resources, and participate meaningfully in social, economic, and political processes. Empowered women contribute not only to their own well-being but also to the overall development and progress of society.

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG-5) explicitly aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by 2030. SDG-5 emphasizes eliminating discrimination and violence against women, ensuring equal participation in leadership and decision-making, recognizing unpaid care work, and providing universal access to reproductive health and rights. This

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goal is closely interconnected with other SDGs, including poverty reduction, quality education, decent work, and inclusive growth.

In India, the status of women presents a mixed picture. While constitutional guarantees ensure equality and several policy initiatives promote women's welfare, persistent gender gaps remain in education, labor force participation, health outcomes, and political representation. Social norms, patriarchal structures, and economic constraints continue to limit women's empowerment, particularly among rural, tribal, and marginalized communities.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines gender equality and women's empowerment in India within the framework of SDG-5. The paper aims to analyze existing challenges, policy responses, and opportunities for transformative change. It seeks to address key research questions related to progress, gaps, and strategies, while focusing on the scope of social, economic, and political empowerment of women in India.

II. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Gender equality, gender equity, and women's empowerment are interrelated yet distinct concepts that provide the foundation for understanding SDG-5. Gender equality refers to a state in which women and men enjoy the same rights, opportunities, and access to resources across social, economic, and political domains. Gender equity, in contrast, emphasizes fairness and justice in the distribution of benefits and responsibilities, recognizing that historical and structural disadvantages require targeted measures to achieve equality in outcomes. Women's empowerment involves enhancing women's agency, autonomy, and capacity to make informed decisions, exercise control over resources, and participate effectively in governance and development processes.

Feminist theories offer critical perspectives for analyzing gender relations and power structures. Liberal feminism focuses on legal equality, education, and equal opportunities, while radical feminism highlights patriarchy and structural oppression embedded in social institutions. Socialist and Marxist feminist approaches emphasize the intersection of gender with class and labor, particularly women's unpaid care work. Contemporary intersectional feminism further recognizes the overlapping influences of caste, class, religion, ethnicity, and location in shaping women's lived experiences in India. Empowerment frameworks, such as Naila Kabeer's model, conceptualize empowerment as a process involving resources, agency, and achievements.

III. Status of Gender Equality in India

The status of gender equality in India reflects significant progress in certain areas alongside persistent and deeply rooted disparities. In education, female literacy rates have improved substantially over the past decades, and gender gaps in school enrollment at the primary level have narrowed. However, disparities remain at the secondary and higher education levels, particularly among girls from rural, tribal, and marginalized communities. Early marriage, household responsibilities, and safety concerns continue to limit educational attainment for many girls. In terms

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of health and nutrition, women face challenges such as maternal mortality, anemia, and unequal access to healthcare services. Gender-based nutritional discrimination, especially in childhood, contributes to poor health outcomes for women across their life cycle.

Women's participation in the workforce and economy remains a critical concern. Despite rising educational attainment, India has one of the lowest female labor force participation rates globally. A large proportion of working women are engaged in informal, low-paid, and insecure employment, with limited access to social protection. Wage gaps, occupational segregation, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work further constrain women's economic empowerment. While initiatives promoting entrepreneurship and self-help groups have created opportunities, structural barriers continue to restrict women's full economic participation.

In the realm of political representation and leadership, women's participation has improved at the grassroots level through reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions, which have enabled millions of women to enter local governance. However, women remain underrepresented in state legislatures and Parliament, limiting their influence in national policymaking. Leadership roles in political parties, administration, and corporate governance are also largely male-dominated.

Gender inequality in India is further shaped by regional, caste, class, and rural-urban divides. Women from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minority communities, and economically weaker sections face intersecting forms of disadvantage. Urban women generally have better access to education and employment opportunities than their rural counterparts, yet urban settings also present challenges such as safety and informal employment. These intersecting inequalities underscore the need for inclusive, context-specific strategies to advance gender equality across India.

IV. Policy and Legal Framework in India

India has established a comprehensive constitutional, legal, and policy framework to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. The Constitution of India provides a strong foundation through its guarantees of equality, non-discrimination, and social justice. Article 14 ensures equality before the law, while Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex and empowers the state to make special provisions for women. Article 16 guarantees equal opportunity in public employment, and Article 39(d) directs the state to ensure equal pay for equal work. Additionally, Article 42 emphasizes just and humane working conditions and maternity relief, reflecting the constitutional commitment to women's welfare.

Building on these principles, India has enacted several key legislations to protect women's rights and address gender-based discrimination and violence. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 provides legal remedies and safeguards against physical, emotional, sexual, and economic abuse within households. The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 (amended in 2017) enhances maternity leave and workplace protections, supporting women's participation in the workforce. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH

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Act) mandates preventive measures and grievance redressal mechanisms to ensure safe and dignified working environments for women.

Alongside legal measures, the government has introduced various welfare and empowerment schemes aligned with SDG-5. Beti Bachao Beti Padhao aims to address gender-biased sex selection and promote girls' education. Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) facilitates women's financial inclusion by providing access to banking services. The Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana improves women's health and dignity by providing clean cooking fuel and reducing indoor air pollution. Other initiatives focus on skill development, entrepreneurship, and nutrition.

The role of institutions and governance mechanisms is crucial in implementing these policies. Ministries such as the Ministry of Women and Child Development, National and State Commissions for Women, and local governance bodies oversee program execution, monitoring, and grievance redressal. Despite this robust framework, challenges in enforcement, coordination, and awareness persist, highlighting the need for stronger institutional capacity and gender-responsive governance to achieve meaningful gender equality.

V. Women's Empowerment and SDG-5 Implementation

The implementation of SDG-5 in India focuses on multidimensional strategies aimed at empowering women socially, economically, and politically. Economic empowerment remains a central pillar, as access to income and financial resources enhances women's autonomy and decision-making power. Self-Help Groups (SHGs), particularly under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), have played a transformative role by promoting savings, microcredit, and collective entrepreneurship among rural women. These groups strengthen women's bargaining capacity, enable livelihood diversification, and foster social solidarity. Additionally, initiatives encouraging women entrepreneurship, such as Mudra loans and Start-Up India, seek to integrate women into formal economic systems. Financial inclusion programs, including Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, direct benefit transfers, and digital banking, have expanded women's access to savings, credit, and insurance.

Education and skill development are critical for long-term empowerment and gender equality. Government programs aim to improve girls' school enrollment, retention, and transition to higher education through scholarships, residential schools, and targeted incentives. Skill development initiatives under schemes like Skill India and PM Kaushal Vikas Yojana focus on enhancing employability by providing vocational and digital skills tailored to women's needs. However, gaps remain in aligning skills with market demand and addressing barriers such as mobility and care responsibilities.

Women's empowerment under SDG-5 also emphasizes health, reproductive rights, and nutrition. Programs such as Janani Suraksha Yojana, Poshan Abhiyaan, and Mission Indradhanush aim to improve maternal and child health outcomes, reduce anemia, and enhance nutritional security.

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Access to reproductive healthcare and family planning services is vital for women's bodily autonomy and overall well-being, though disparities persist across regions and socio-economic groups.

Finally, digital empowerment and access to technology have emerged as new drivers of women's empowerment. Digital literacy initiatives, mobile connectivity, and online platforms enable women to access information, services, education, and markets. Bridging the digital gender divide is essential for ensuring inclusive and equitable implementation of SDG-5 in India.

VI. Challenges and Barriers

Despite policy commitments and progress under SDG-5, women's empowerment in India continues to face multiple structural and socio-cultural challenges. These barriers operate at individual, community, and institutional levels and limit the realization of gender equality.

1. Patriarchal norms and social attitudes

Deep-rooted patriarchal values continue to shape gender roles, prioritizing male authority and female domesticity. Practices such as early marriage, son preference, and restrictions on women's mobility limit educational and economic opportunities. Social norms often discourage women from pursuing leadership roles or independent careers.

2. Gender-based violence and safety concerns

Violence against women—domestic violence, sexual harassment, trafficking, and cyber abuse—remains a major obstacle to empowerment. Fear of violence restricts women's participation in education, employment, and public life. Weak reporting mechanisms, social stigma, and inadequate enforcement of laws further aggravate the problem.

3. Wage gaps, unpaid care work, and informal employment

Women in India earn significantly less than men for comparable work. A large proportion of women are engaged in informal and insecure employment without social protection. Additionally, women bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work, reducing their time and opportunities for paid employment and skill development.

4. Limited access to education, assets, and decision-making

Gender disparities persist in access to quality education, land ownership, credit, and productive assets. Women's participation in household and institutional decision-making remains limited, particularly among marginalized groups. These constraints weaken women's agency and restrict their ability to influence economic and social outcomes.

Addressing these barriers requires coordinated policy interventions, social change, and inclusive governance frameworks.

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VII. Case Studies and Best Practices

Case studies and best practices provide valuable insights into effective strategies for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment in India under SDG-5. These examples highlight how targeted interventions, community participation, and supportive institutions can create sustainable outcomes.

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and microfinance models

Self-Help Groups have emerged as one of the most successful grassroots models for women's economic empowerment in India. Under initiatives such as the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), SHGs enable women to mobilize savings, access microcredit, and undertake income-generating activities. Participation in SHGs has enhanced women's financial literacy, bargaining power, and social confidence.

Women leaders in local governance (Panchayati Raj)

The reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has significantly increased women's participation in local governance. Female leaders have been instrumental in addressing issues such as water supply, sanitation, health, and education. Studies indicate that women-led panchayats are more responsive to community welfare and inclusive development priorities. This model demonstrates the transformative potential of political empowerment at the grassroots level.

Successful NGO and community-led initiatives

Numerous NGOs and community organizations have played a critical role in empowering women through education, livelihood training, legal awareness, and health interventions. Programs run by organizations such as SEWA and other women's collectives focus on strengthening women's rights, entrepreneurship, and leadership capacities. These initiatives often adopt participatory approaches, ensuring local relevance and sustainability.

International comparisons and lessons for India

International experiences from countries such as Rwanda, Bangladesh, and Nordic nations highlight the importance of strong political commitment, social protection, and gender-responsive policies. Lessons from these models underscore the need for integrated approaches combining economic, social, and political empowerment to accelerate progress on SDG-5 in India.

VIII. Role of Civil Society and International Agencies

Civil society organizations and international agencies play a crucial role in advancing gender equality and women's empowerment in India, complementing government efforts under SDG-5. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and women's movements have been instrumental in raising awareness, advocating for women's rights, and providing grassroots support. Through initiatives focused on education, legal literacy, livelihood training, and health services, NGOs help empower

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women, particularly those from marginalized and vulnerable communities. Women's collectives and grassroots movements have also contributed to policy advocacy and social change by challenging patriarchal norms and promoting gender-sensitive practices.

International agencies such as UN Women, UNICEF, UNDP, and the World Bank support India's gender equality agenda through technical assistance, funding, research, and capacity building. UN Women promotes gender-responsive governance, leadership, and economic empowerment, while UNICEF focuses on girls' education, nutrition, and protection. These agencies facilitate the alignment of national policies with global SDG frameworks and best practices through international partnerships.

Additionally, public-private partnerships (PPPs) have emerged as effective mechanisms for promoting gender equality. Collaboration between governments, corporations, and civil society enables skill development, entrepreneurship, digital inclusion, and workplace gender equity initiatives. Such partnerships enhance resource mobilization, innovation, and scalability, strengthening collective efforts to achieve SDG-5 in India.

IX. Policy Recommendations

To accelerate progress toward SDG-5 in India, a comprehensive and inclusive policy approach is required. The following pointwise recommendations focus on structural reforms, institutional strengthening, and social transformation.

1. Strengthening education and skill development for girls

- Ensure universal access to quality education for girls at all levels, particularly secondary and higher education.
- Expand scholarships, residential schools, and transport facilities for girls from rural, tribal, and marginalized communities.
- Integrate digital literacy, STEM education, and vocational skills aligned with market demand.
- Promote life skills, leadership training, and gender-sensitization programs within school curricula.

2. Enhancing women's economic and political participation

- Increase women's participation in the workforce through flexible work arrangements, childcare facilities, and maternity support.
- Promote women entrepreneurship through easier access to credit, markets, and business mentoring.
- Strengthen Self-Help Groups and cooperatives to enhance collective economic power.

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- Ensure greater representation of women in political institutions through reservation and leadership training programs.

3. Gender-responsive budgeting and governance

- Institutionalize gender-responsive budgeting across ministries and state governments to ensure equitable resource allocation.
- Strengthen gender audits and impact assessments in public policies and programs.
- Enhance coordination among ministries, local governments, and civil society for effective implementation of SDG-5.

4. Addressing violence and ensuring legal enforcement

- Strengthen enforcement of laws related to domestic violence, sexual harassment, and trafficking.
- Improve access to justice through fast-track courts, legal aid, and victim support services.
- Promote community-based awareness campaigns to challenge social acceptance of gender-based violence.

5. Inclusive strategies for marginalized women

- Design targeted interventions for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minorities, migrant, and disabled women.
- Ensure access to education, healthcare, land, and financial resources for disadvantaged groups.
- Promote participatory decision-making and community leadership among marginalized women.

These measures are essential for achieving sustainable and inclusive gender equality in India.

X. Conclusion

Gender equality and the empowerment of women are central to achieving sustainable and inclusive development in India, as emphasized under Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG-5). While India has made notable progress through constitutional safeguards, legal reforms, and targeted welfare schemes, significant challenges persist in the form of patriarchal norms, economic inequalities, gender-based violence, and unequal access to education and resources. Women's participation in the workforce and political leadership remains limited, particularly for those from marginalized communities. Moving forward, achieving SDG-5 in India requires sustained political commitment, gender-responsive governance, and social transformation. An integrated, rights-based approach will

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be essential to ensure equal opportunities and empower women as key agents of national development.

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