Women's Empowerment and Inclusive Growth in India: Achieving the Goals of SDG-5

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Abstract

Women's empowerment is a critical driver of inclusive growth and sustainable development in India. It encompasses enhancing women's social, economic, political, and legal capacities, enabling them to participate fully in decision-making and access resources. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal-5 (SDG-5) aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, highlighting the importance of eliminating discrimination, violence, and barriers to education, employment, and leadership.

In India, initiatives such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, and financial inclusion schemes have expanded women's access to education, health, financial resources, and economic opportunities. Despite progress, challenges like gender-based violence, patriarchal norms, low labor force participation, and digital and financial divides continue to impede empowerment. Strengthening education, skill development, legal protection, and gender-responsive policies is essential to achieve SDG-5. Empowered women contribute to economic productivity, poverty reduction, and social equity, fostering a more inclusive and sustainable development pathway for India.

Keywords: BBBP, SDG-5, Gender Equality, MUDRA Schemes, Stand-Up India, Financial Gender Divide.

1. Introduction

Women's empowerment refers to the process of enhancing the social, economic, political, and legal strength of women, enabling them to participate fully in decision-making, access resources, and exercise control over their lives. Gender equality, closely linked to empowerment, implies equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for women and men across all spheres of life. Both concepts are central to achieving inclusive and sustainable development, as societies that empower women demonstrate higher productivity, economic diversification, and social well-being. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal-5 (SDG-5) explicitly aims to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls." It encompasses targets such as eliminating discrimination and violence, ensuring equal participation in leadership, access to education, economic resources, and reproductive rights. SDG-5 recognizes that gender equality is not only a fundamental human right but

also a prerequisite for achieving broader developmental objectives, including poverty reduction, economic growth, and social equity.

In the Indian context, women's empowerment remains a critical concern due to persistent socio-economic and cultural disparities. Despite progress in areas such as education, health, and political representation, challenges including gender-based violence, patriarchal social norms, lower labor force participation, wage gaps, and unequal access to financial and digital resources continue to restrict women's full participation in the economy. Rural-urban disparities, caste and class inequalities, and limited access to leadership positions further exacerbate the challenges.

2. Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to examine the concept and multifaceted dimensions of women's empowerment in India, including social, economic, political, and legal aspects. The study also seeks to assess India's progress toward achieving the targets of Sustainable Development Goal-5 (SDG-5), evaluating the effectiveness of government initiatives and policy measures.

3. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions to evaluate women's empowerment and its impact on inclusive growth in India. First, it examines how women's empowerment contributes to inclusive economic growth, particularly through education, labor participation, entrepreneurship, and leadership roles. Second, it investigates the current status of SDG-5 implementation in India, assessing achievements and gaps across key targets. Finally, it explores whether targeted gender policies and programs can accelerate progress toward achieving SDG-5 in India.

4. Review of Literature

1. Theoretical perspectives on gender equality and development: Sen's capability approach emphasizes expanding individual freedoms and capabilities as central to development. Gender equality enhances capabilities, enabling women to contribute effectively to economic and social development (Sen, 1999). Amartya Sen's framework highlights the importance of agency and opportunity in empowering women.

2. Gender and development (GAD) approach: The GAD approach conceptualizes empowerment as transformative change in gender relations, arguing that development must focus on structural inequalities, not just women's welfare (Young, 1993). This perspective underpins many gender-responsive policies globally.

3. Global studies on women's empowerment and economic growth: World Bank (2012) research shows that increasing female labor force participation boosts GDP growth. Studies in OECD countries find a positive correlation between gender parity in education and economic performance (OECD, 2017).

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4. Indian research on gender inequality: Desai and Andrist (2010) highlight persistent gender gaps in education and employment in India, despite significant policy efforts. Economic participation remains low compared to other developing economies.

5. Women's labor participation and education: Klasen and Pieters (2015) find that higher female education correlates with improved labor market outcomes, yet India shows stagnation in female workforce participation, suggesting structural barriers.

6. Gaps in existing literature related to SDG-5 outcomes: While studies examine individual dimensions such as education or labor, there is limited research linking comprehensive SDG-5 targets—such as political representation, economic empowerment, and freedom from violence—in an integrated framework. Few Indian studies assess holistic SDG-5 outcomes, highlighting a gap in policy evaluation and multidimensional measurement of empowerment (Plan International, 2020).

5. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study draws on three complementary approaches:

1. Gender and Development (GAD) Approach:

The GAD framework emphasizes transforming gender relations and addressing structural inequalities rather than focusing solely on women as beneficiaries. It highlights that empowerment involves increasing women's agency, decision-making power, and control over resources. This approach underpins gender-responsive policies and programs in India, such as educational initiatives, skill development, and financial inclusion schemes targeting women.

2. Human Capital Theory:

Human capital theory posits that investments in education, health, and skills enhance individual productivity and economic outcomes. Applied to women, it suggests that improving access to education, vocational training, and health services increases women's labor force participation and income-generating potential, thereby contributing to broader economic growth. Enhancing women's human capital is central to achieving inclusive development and reducing gender-based disparities.

3. Capability Approach (Amartya Sen):

Sen's capability approach frames development as the expansion of individual freedoms and capabilities. For women, this means the ability to participate fully in economic, social, and political life. Empowerment is viewed not only as access to resources but also as the freedom to make meaningful choices. This framework emphasizes multidimensional empowerment, encompassing education, health, employment, decision-making, and social participation.

By integrating these three approaches, the study analyzes women's empowerment as a multidimensional phenomenon that drives inclusive growth, promotes gender equality, and contributes to the achievement of SDG-5 in India.

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6. Status of Women in India

The status of women in India reflects both significant progress and persistent disparities across social, economic, and political domains. Key indicators provide insight into their current position:

1. Education and Literacy Levels

- ➤ Enrollment in primary education is nearly universal, but dropout rates remain high at secondary and tertiary levels, particularly in rural areas and among marginalized communities.

- ➤ Gender gaps in higher education persist, limiting women's access to professional and technical courses, which affects employability and economic participation.

2. Health and Nutrition Indicators

- ➤ India has seen improvements in maternal and child health, with maternal mortality declining from 556 per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 103 in 2017.

- ➤ Malnutrition, anemia, and limited access to reproductive health services remain significant challenges.

- ➤ Life expectancy for women (70 years) slightly exceeds men's (68 years), indicating progress, but quality of health care and regional disparities continue to affect outcomes.

3. Women's Labor Force Participation

- ➤ Female labor force participation remains low, around 20–25%, significantly lower than male participation.

- ➤ Women are overrepresented in informal, low-paid, and unorganized sectors, often facing wage gaps and job insecurity.

- ➤ Despite higher educational attainment, social norms, household responsibilities, and safety concerns constrain economic participation.

4. Political Participation and Leadership

- ➤ Women's representation in Parliament and state legislatures has gradually increased but remains below the global average (approximately 14% in Lok Sabha).

- ➤ Local governance reforms, such as 33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions, have strengthened grassroots leadership.

- ➤ However, barriers such as patriarchal attitudes, political violence, and limited access to resources continue to restrict effective participation in decision-making.

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Addressing these multidimensional challenges is critical for achieving SDG-5 and inclusive growth.

7. Government Initiatives for Women's Empowerment

The Indian government has implemented several key initiatives aimed at empowering women and promoting gender equality across social, economic, and political spheres. These programs are aligned with SDG-5 and address critical issues such as education, health, economic participation, and legal protection.

1. Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)

➢ Launched in 2015, BBBP aims to combat gender-biased sex selection and promote the survival, protection, and education of girls.

➢ Focuses on improving the child sex ratio and raising awareness about the value of girls in society.

➢ Encourages enrollment of girls in schools and supports their retention through community engagement and incentives.

2. Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY)

➢ Initiated in 2016, PMUY provides LPG connections to women from Below Poverty Line (BPL) households.

➢ Reduces health risks associated with traditional cooking fuels and saves time for women, allowing them to pursue education or economic activities.

➢ Enhances women's decision-making power in household energy and expenditure choices.

3. Stand-Up India and MUDRA Schemes

➢ Stand-Up India promotes entrepreneurship among women and SC/ST communities by providing bank loans to set up new businesses.

➢ MUDRA (Micro Units Development and Refinance Agency) loans support women micro-entrepreneurs in starting or expanding small enterprises.

➢ These initiatives improve financial independence, foster entrepreneurship, and create employment opportunities, contributing to economic empowerment.

4. Legal and Institutional Frameworks for Gender Equality

➢ India has enacted laws such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005)**,** Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006), and Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013).

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➢ The Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) and National Commissions for Women oversee policy implementation, monitor gender-based programs, and advocate for women's rights.

➢ These frameworks provide protection, promote legal literacy, and ensure enforcement of gender equality measures.

Through these initiatives, India addresses multiple dimensions of women's empowerment—health, education, economic participation, and legal protection—while fostering awareness, reducing inequality, and enhancing women's agency in both household and societal decision-making. Collectively, these programs play a vital role in advancing SDG-5 and inclusive growth.

8. Women's Empowerment and Inclusive Growth

Women's empowerment plays a pivotal role in promoting inclusive economic growth, as it enhances human capital, labor participation, and decision-making at household and community levels. Empowered women contribute to productivity, social development, and equitable distribution of resources. Key dimensions include:

1. Role of Women in Economic Development

➢ Women constitute a significant portion of the workforce, contributing to agriculture, industry, and services.

➢ Increased participation in the labor market enhances household income, savings, and consumption, fostering overall economic growth.

➢ Women's involvement in community-based programs and cooperatives supports local development initiatives and social welfare.

2. Entrepreneurship and Self-Employment

➢ Women entrepreneurs drive innovation, employment generation, and rural economic development.

➢ Schemes like Stand-Up India and MUDRA loans have expanded access to capital for women-owned enterprises.

➢ Encouraging women-led micro and small businesses strengthens local economies and promotes gender equality in business leadership.

3. Financial Inclusion and Access to Resources

➢ Access to bank accounts, credit, insurance, and digital financial services empowers women to manage finances, invest in education, and improve livelihoods.

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➢ Programs like Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) and microfinance initiatives have enabled women to accumulate savings and access credit, increasing their economic autonomy.

➢ Financial literacy and capacity-building programs further enhance decision-making and resource management.

4. Impact on Poverty Reduction and Social Equity

➢ Empowered women contribute directly to poverty alleviation by participating in income-generating activities and making household expenditure decisions that prioritize health, nutrition, and education.

➢ Gender equality in economic opportunities improves social equity by reducing disparities in income, education, and health.

Ensuring equitable access to education, financial resources, entrepreneurship opportunities, and decision-making positions strengthens economic resilience and accelerates progress toward SDG-5 in India.

9. Challenges in Achieving SDG-5

Despite policy initiatives and increasing awareness, India faces several significant challenges in achieving Sustainable Development Goal-5 (SDG-5), which aims to ensure gender equality and empower all women and girls.

1. Gender-Based Violence and Discrimination

➢ Women in India continue to face physical, sexual, and psychological violence in domestic and public spheres.

➢ Discrimination in workplaces, educational institutions, and access to resources undermines their confidence, safety, and participation in society.

2. Unequal Access to Education, Health, and Employment

➢ Gender disparities persist in education, with dropout rates higher for girls in rural areas and among marginalized communities.

➢ Access to healthcare, maternal services, and nutrition is often limited, affecting women's overall well-being and productivity.

➢ Women's labor force participation remains low, and opportunities are concentrated in informal, low-paid, and insecure jobs, limiting economic empowerment.

3. Social Norms and Patriarchal Structures

➢ Traditional social norms continue to restrict women's mobility, decision-making, and career aspirations.

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➤ Patriarchal attitudes often prioritize male education and employment, reinforcing gender inequality across generations.

➤ Women's voices in leadership, governance, and community decision-making remain underrepresented despite legislative reservations.

4. Digital and Financial Gender Divide

➤ Women have lower access to smartphones, internet connectivity, and digital literacy, limiting participation in the digital economy.

➤ Limited access to formal banking, credit, and financial services reduces economic autonomy and constrains entrepreneurship.

➤ The divide in digital and financial inclusion reinforces existing inequalities and limits the transformative potential of technology in empowerment initiatives.

Only a multidimensional approach can accelerate India's progress toward SDG-5 and ensure meaningful empowerment of women.

10. Policy Recommendations

Achieving SDG-5 in India requires targeted policy interventions that address structural, social, and economic barriers to women's empowerment. The following recommendations provide a comprehensive approach:

1. Strengthening Education and Skill Development for Women

➤ Expand access to quality education at all levels, especially for girls in rural and marginalized communities.

➤ Promote vocational training, technical skills, and digital literacy programs to enhance employability and economic independence.

➤ Scholarships, mentorship programs, and awareness campaigns can reduce dropout rates and promote participation in higher education.

2. Promoting Women's Labor Force Participation

➤ Implement policies that incentivize female employment in both formal and informal sectors, including flexible work arrangements and maternity benefits.

➤ Support women entrepreneurship through access to credit, business training, and market linkages.

➤ Strengthen microfinance, cooperative models, and self-help groups to expand women-led economic activities.

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3. Enhancing Safety, Legal Protection, and Social Security

➢ Strengthen enforcement of laws against gender-based violence, harassment, and discrimination.

➢ Expand social security programs, including pensions, health insurance, and maternity benefits, to protect vulnerable women.

➢ Promote awareness campaigns on women's rights and legal protections.

4. Gender-Responsive Budgeting and Governance

➢ Allocate government resources strategically to address gender disparities in education, health, employment, and leadership.

➢ Incorporate gender impact assessments in policy planning and program evaluation.

➢ Promote women's representation in decision-making bodies at local, state, and national levels to ensure inclusive governance.

➢ Encourage collaboration between government, civil society, and private sectors to implement gender-sensitive policies effectively.

By implementing these measures, India can accelerate progress toward gender equality, enhance women's participation in economic and social development, and achieve the targets of SDG-5, fostering inclusive growth and sustainable development.

11. Conclusion

Women's empowerment is central to achieving inclusive growth and sustainable development in India. Despite significant progress in education, health, political participation, and financial inclusion, structural inequalities, patriarchal norms, and socio-economic barriers continue to constrain women's full potential. Empowering women enhances labor force participation, entrepreneurship, and decision-making, contributing directly to economic productivity, poverty reduction, and social equity. To achieve SDG-5, it is essential to strengthen education and skill development, promote women's employment, enhance safety and legal protection, and adopt gender-responsive governance. A multidimensional and sustained approach will ensure that women can fully exercise their rights, contribute to inclusive growth, and accelerate India's progress toward gender equality.

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