

Gender Equality in India: An Analysis in the Context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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ABSTRACT

In 2015, United Nations' members unanimously adopted seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), totaling 169 targets, as per 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The 5th SDG is: "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls." Gender equality is interlinked with other SDGs ('No Poverty,' 'Quality Education,' 'Decent Work and economic growth,' etc.) As a United Nations member, India too strives towards ideals of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This paper discusses India's progress toward SDG 5 with regard to the following principal indices: education, health, economic participation, as well as gender-based violence (GBV). It also sheds light on SDG 5's mutual links with SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Well being and Good Health) and SDG 13 (Climate Action). The paper aims to pinpoint systemic barriers and policy gaps, and to provide actionable recommendations for the same. These recommendations can be actualized via legal frameworks and social reforms, in addition to investments, in service of gender-inclusive development.

Keywords: Gender Equality, SDGs, GBV, Economic Growth, Quality Education.

Introduction

In 2015, seventeen SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) have been adopted by United Nations members as per 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, encompassing 169 targets. This endeavor followed Millennium Development Goals of 2000. Member nations pledged to expand their efforts "in collaborative partnership . . . for people, planet and prosperity." – a resounding demonstration of the merits of a rules-based world order, shaped by collaboration and partnership via global institutions.

The fifth SDG seeks to "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls." Gender equality is not an isolated ideal. It intersects with other priorities, involving poverty eradication (SDG 1), health (SDG 3), climate (SDG 13), all of which correlate with the status of women in society. Indeed, the member nations pledge to "Leave No One Behind." The intersectional nature of these issues makes gender equality – along social, economic, professional lines – indispensable to the earnest pursuit of Sustainable Development.

The vision of an egalitarian, prosperous and harmonious future resonates with the ancient Indian ideal of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, i.e. 'the world is one family.' India too pursues these SDGs. However, progress vis-a-vis gender equality has been uneven. Cultural mores, social & economic disparities, other pertinent issues ensure progress on one count goes hand in hand with setbacks in others.

Steps have been taken to overcome entrenched gender disparities. Initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao have enabled marked improvement in girls' education rates. However, India lags behind in critical areas like female labor participation, gender-based violence, etc. (NITI Aayog 2024). Given such disparities, strategies integrating efforts at gender justice across developmental sectors.

By discussing and critiquing India's performance and challenges in this regard, this paper hopes to illuminate the steps leading to gender-inclusive sustainable development in India.

Global Context: Gender Equality and the SDGs

SDGs represent a global collaborative effort for a sustainable future. Within this globalized framework, SDG 5 targets gender inequality, following a long lineage of actions for gender justice. Despite successes, putting these ideals into practice, thus overcoming deeply entrenched attitudes, continues to be a challenge. For instance, UN Commission on Status of Women 2024 commented "poverty has a female face." Populist political trends, as well as economic downturn, have the potential to undermine the hard-won gains made by women worldwide, including the rights to education, work, as well as sexual and reproductive rights.

The Gender Snapshot 2024 report identifies persistent barriers such as poverty, underrepresentation in leadership, unequal access to economic opportunities, education, etc. (UN Women & UN DESA, 2024). In addition, the report notes that women's employment in low-income countries is overwhelmingly (91.1%) in the informal sector, outside the State's regulation and protection. These disparities make women and girls vulnerable to climate crisis, pollution, etc. Geopolitical crises have further amplified these factors, e.g., food insecurity, displacement, sexual violence, etc.

The McKinsey Global Institute (2015) notes that gender-inclusive policies can potentially include \$12 trillion to global GDP by 2025, adding an economic dimension to the moral-ethical case for gender equality. Using a Gender Parity Score, it correlates links between gender equality, attitudes towards women, and economic parity in any given society.

Kabeer (2016) notes that women benefit more from large-scale manufacturing and services, as opposed to traditional small-landholding agriculture. They are also underrepresented in capital-intensive industries (like mining). This implies that the pattern of economic growth is as vital as its pace, enmeshed with the realities of its social contexts.

India's Progress and Persistent Challenges

- **Education and Health**

Significant steps were taken by India to encourage girls' welfare as well as education. The most prominent among these is Beti Bachao Beti Padhao ("Save and educate the girl child") scheme. NCW (National Commission for Women) lists numerous 'Women Centric Schemes' pertinent to women's education and health, e.g., Janani Suraksha Yojana ("Maternity Safety Scheme"), Sukanya Samridhi Yojana ("Girl child prosperity account"), Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), etc. These schemes provide a holistic framework to address the complex contexts within which the question of gender-equal education and health must be dealt with.

However, discrepancies continue to exist along rural-urban lines, as well as in the case of marginalized communities, owing to lack of access, awareness, etc. Improvement in maternal health is seen. However, reproductive health services are not equitable, nor is there adequate awareness about contraceptives, maternal autonomy, etc., especially in underfunded rural sectors (Ghoseet al, 2022).

- **Economic Participation**

As noted above, 91.1% of women's employment falls under the informal sector, beyond the State's purview, in low-income countries. In terms of female labor force participation, India was ranked 120th out of 131 countries by ILO's Global Employment Trends 2013 report (Chaudhary & Verick, 2014). Several features have contributed to this: unpaid care responsibilities, wage gaps, limited access to formal employment, etc.

Several efforts have been made in the governmental as well as private spheres in this regard. The government has a number of schemes aimed at increasing women's employment and empowering women entrepreneurs: Udyogini Scheme ("Women Entrepreneur Scheme"), Women Scientist Scheme (WOS), Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP, Woman Farmer Empowerment Project). Initiatives like Stand-Up India should further expand rural outreach to bridge economic gaps (Agarwal, 2021).

- **Gender-Based Violence (GBV)**

SDG 5 calls for "ending violence and exploitation of women and girls." Gender-based violence continues to be a rampant malaise inflicted upon our society. Throughout the world, denial of access to economic, sexual and social autonomy leaves women at a higher risk of exploitation.

India's National Crime Records Bureau shows an increase in crimes against women, from domestic violence to sexual harassment. 2018-22, reports of these crimes increased 12.9%. This may imply an increase in actual crimes, or enhanced reporting mechanisms.

India's progressive legal framework has enacted several laws to tackle GBV: Dowry Prohibition Act 1961, Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act 2013. Social stigma, legal gaps, as well as lack of training and accountability on part of officers, continue to hamstring these laws (Sharma, Sheeba, et al. 2018).

- **Intersectionality of Gender with Other SDGs**

SDG 5's focus on gender justice, intersects with the aims and concerns of several other SDGs. To realize one goal is to realize all of them, and vice versa. This is inherent to the SDGs' holistic, egalitarian approach to development. As the UN's Agenda 2030 says, the SDGs are 'integrated and indivisible.'

- **SDG 1: No Poverty**

As stated earlier, being denied economic autonomy and professional opportunities leaves women vulnerable to exploitation. Over 90% of India's female labor participation is in the informal sector, outside the government's formal sphere of control. Women in rural India in particular face disproportionate poverty, owing to lack of access to resources as well as land ownership.

The Indian government has put into place many economic schemes to empower women and safeguard their economic autonomy across sectors: Mahila Samakhya Programme ("Education for Women's Equality Program"), Udyogini Scheme ("Women Entrepreneur Scheme"), Women Scientist Scheme (WOS), SIDBI – Women Entrepreneur Fund, Swayamsiddha Scheme ("Self-Reliant Scheme"), Mahila Samridhi Yojana (MSY: "Women's Prosperity Scheme"), etc. By ensuring women an equal footing economically and professionally, India will go a long way in fulfilling both SDG 5 and SDG 1. Moreover, eliminating poverty in general, even without targeting women, helps women (Duflo 2012). Targeted skill development programs and microfinance initiatives are key to reducing poverty.

- **SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being**

Among the 5 aims of SDG are "ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights," which ties into SDG 3. Gender equality also extends to access to health facilities for women. Gender disparities are amplified when women are denied access to economic, health and social rights. Further, women-related issues are often underfunded. Disparities in accessing healthcare are also a pertinent issue. It is important to overcome social stigmas as well as lack of awareness, particularly in the rural sectors, as concerns issue of maternal health, consent, reproductive autonomy, etc. For example, unplanned abortions are responsible for a third of maternal mortality cases (National Programme for Family Planning, 2018). NGOs are also active in the rural sections to educate women about reproductive rights.

Ghoseet al (2022) suggest that, in addition to expanding access to medical counsel, service providers be culturally sensitive, trained and courteous. They further add that India's legal framework needs to acknowledge GBV as not just a law-and-order issue, but also relevant to women's health. This underlines the link between SDG 5 and SDG 3.

- **SDG 13: Climate Action**

It calls for "regulating emissions and promoting developments in renewable energy." Gender inequalities leave women vulnerable to consequences of climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss. Climate-related displacement, food insecurity, etc., impact women disproportionately (Gender Snapshot 2024). Women in low-income regions are often tasked with collecting food, fuel, water etc., resources climate change makes scarcer. Political crisis owing to climate change can further expose women to exploitation.

The Centre for Development Policy and Practice (CDPP) advocates for subsidies on clean energy, minimizing the effort spent by rural women in securing resources. Governmental and private bodies can invest in the agricultural sector, broadening access to tools and income sources (Sukumar 2025).

In contrast to top-down agri-business solutions, however, Tandon (2021) defends an ethics of sustainable self-sufficiency, which would allow communities to develop in accordance with their own diverse grassroots contexts. She notes contemporary protests for food sovereignty led by women in Brazil,

the Caribbean Islands, Bangladesh, etc. A sense of ownership over local resources is important to maximize women's participation as stakeholders along with decision-makers.

Policy Gaps and Recommendations

- **Legal Framework Strengthening**

As already noted, Dowry Prohibition Act 1961, Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act 2013 are key legislations in India against GBV. However, factors undermine effective implementation, e.g., social stigma, legal gaps, lack of training/accountability (Sharma, Sheeba, et al. 2018). This requires stronger legal mechanisms, adequate training of officers and service providers, as well as campaigns of public awareness. In addition, reforms such as Women's Reservation Bill should be passed. Monitoring & accountability mechanisms must be made robust enough for enforcement.

- **Scaling Up Gender-Responsive Investments**

Despite steady growth in India's economy, women's participation continues to be underwhelming, largely confined to low-paying low-skill informal labor. The COVID lockdowns are expected to have further shrunk this workforce (Kumar 2023). The imperative of upskilling India's women workforce is in line with SDG 8: "Decent work and economic growth." The government has various schemes in operation addressing these concerns. Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY: "Prime Minister Skill Development Scheme") offers short-term skills training; as of November 2021, the scheme has trained 4,830,646 women. Schemes like (Skills Acquisition and Knowledge Awareness for Livelihood Promotion) support PMKVY.

Policies or programs of Skill India and Stand-Up India must be funded and leveraged meaningfully, expand rural outreach and provide targeted support for marginalized women. Similarly, reproductive health infrastructure should also be invested in (Agarwal, 2021). As the CDPP has suggested, investments in the agricultural sector by governmental as well as private bodies help broaden access to tools and income sources, and promote a green economy.

- **Data Collection and Monitoring**

Comprehensive data collection is critical for tracking progress and consequently informing policies. Data like maternal mortality rates, female workforce, enrollment in higher education, crime reports, etc. are critical to gauge India's progress on the gender front, and to critically analyze gaps, improvements and reversals. It is also important to coordinate and streamline data monitoring systems used by various states under a reliable, uniform framework (NITI Aayog 2018). Data quality at the grassroots can thus be reassessed. Adopting digital platforms and community-based data collection can contribute to accurate assessment.

- **Societal Reform**

Social stigma, patriarchal attitudes, taboos hamper gender equality. They discourage women from working, education, reporting GBV, decision-making, etc. To this end, it is essential to embark on extensive public awareness campaigns, also involving men and boys, to break down patriarchal norms. This will also create an environment conducive to promoting women in leadership roles, thus taking the lead in pursuing other SDGs as well. Social media, entertainment, and other such popular means of broadcasting may be availed to promote these attitudes. Education remains the sphere most likely to induce long-term changes in society.

Conclusion

India's path towards gender equality has been defined by progress & challenges alike. Female education and maternal health have witnessed marked improvements, result of focused policy interventions. However, socio-cultural norms reinforce low female workforce participation rates, rampant cases of GBV, and entrenched attitudes. These realities undermine gender parity. Tackling them demands an approach that incorporates legal reform, investment, & reforming social attitudes.

The intersectional nature of the SDGs implies that gender equality is inherently correlated to development on other fronts: poverty, health, climate action, etc. Gender equality is part of a holistic, egalitarian vision of sustainable development. This calls for adoption of holistic strategies. Strong policies can contribute to more inclusive societal norms, and secure accountability at every level. At the same time, encouraging proactive grassroots action also encourages female leadership and stakeholdership. In conclusion, actualizing SDG 5 requires of India, and India's citizens, a combination of joint effort and commitment to a vision of equality and justice.

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