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GENDER EQUALITY AS A CATALYST FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF SDG-5 IN INDIA

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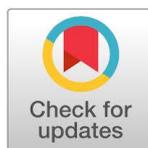
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Abstract: *Gender equality is increasingly recognised as a core driver of sustainable development rather than a standalone social objective. This paper analyses Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) in the Indian context to examine how persistent gender inequalities constrain inclusive and long-term development. Using secondary data from the SDG India Index Indicator Framework, the study evaluates key indicators related to demographics, labour force participation, wages, asset ownership, political representation, health autonomy, and digital access. The findings reveal incremental progress across several indicators but highlight deep-rooted structural inequalities in economic participation, resource ownership, decision-making, and safety. The paper argues that gender inequality undermines progress across multiple SDGs and concludes that achieving SDG 5 through integrated, gender-responsive policies is essential for accelerating India's sustainable development trajectory.*

Keywords: *Gender Equality, Inclusive Development, Sustainable Development Goals, SDG5, Women's Empowerment*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is increasingly recognised as a fundamental prerequisite for sustainable development rather than a standalone social objective. In India, persistent gender disparities in education, health, employment, asset ownership, and decision-making continue to shape poverty, inequality, and development outcomes. Despite economic growth and policy initiatives, gender-based inequalities remain deeply entrenched, constraining inclusive and sustainable development.

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development marked a global commitment to addressing multidimensional challenges through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Among them, SDG 5—achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls—occupies a central, cross-cutting position influencing economic, social, and environmental outcomes. Gender equality strengthens human capital, labour markets, health, education, and social cohesion. This paper argues that progress in SDG 5 is a foundational driver of India’s sustainable development and examines the current status, interlinkages, and challenges of gender equality in India, ultimately advocating for integrated, gender-responsive strategies as the pathway to a more sustainable and inclusive future.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gender equality is widely viewed as a central driver of sustainable development, shaping economic growth, social inclusion, and human well-being. Moving beyond formal legal parity, Kabeer (1994, 2005) highlights agency, autonomy, and empowerment as the basis of substantive equality. Sen (1999) similarly argues that expanding women’s capabilities strengthens development by improving freedom, productivity, and social justice.

Recent labour market research shows that gender gaps persist not only due to education and participation constraints, but also because workplace structures and job design continue to reward inflexible work patterns, sustaining wage and leadership inequalities (Goldin, 2014). In rural and agrarian settings, women’s land rights and tenure security are increasingly recognised as pathways to poverty reduction and empowerment through improved bargaining power, investment incentives, and access to credit and services (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019). Demographic and social norms remain critical: Das Gupta (2005) links “missing women” and skewed sex ratios to entrenched son preference, reinforcing long-term social instability. Global evidence further underlines that gender equality produces multiplier effects across SDGs, particularly poverty reduction, health,

education, and decent work (UN Women, 2018; World Bank, 2022). India's SDG monitoring similarly indicates incremental progress but persistent structural gaps in economic participation, resource ownership, and digital access (NITI Aayog, 2023).

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: GENDER EQUALITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

3.1 Understanding Gender Equality: Equal Rights vs Equal Outcomes

Gender equality transcends the simplistic notion of formal legal parity. It encompasses substantive equality i.e., achieving equal rights, opportunities, resources and outcomes for women and men. Central to this concept are *agency* (the capacity to make strategic life choices), *autonomy* (control over one's life and body), and *empowerment* (the process of gaining these capabilities) (Kabeer, 2005). True equality is measured not just by laws on the books but by outcomes in wages, political representation, asset ownership and freedom from violence.

3.2 Gender Equality within the Sustainable Development Paradigm

Sustainable development rests on three interdependent pillars: economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection. Gender inequality systematically undermines each. Economically, it leads to the underutilisation of half the population's potential, depressing productivity and growth. Socially, it perpetuates exclusion, limits human capital development, and reinforces intergenerational poverty. Environmentally, it restricts women's participation in resource governance, despite their often-critical role as environmental stewards (UN Women, 2018). Therefore, gender equality is not an auxiliary goal but a foundational condition for sustainability.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To assess the current status of gender equality in India using key SDG 5 indicators.
- To analyse the interlinkages between SDG 5 and other Sustainable Development Goals
- To critically examine policy interventions and implementation gaps in achieving SDG-5 in India.

5. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This study employs an analytical and descriptive design based on secondary data. The main data source is the SDG India Index Indicator Framework, representing the latest available official statistics for tracking SDG 5. The analysis focuses on key indicators from the provided dataset: Sex Ratio at Birth, Ratio of Female to Male Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), Ratio of Female to Male Wage, Percentage of Female-Operated Operational Land Holdings, Percentage of Women Owning a Mobile Phone and Percentage

of Women Participating in Household Decisions. These metrics provide a multidimensional view of gender equality in demographics, economic participation, resource access and agency.

6.INTERLINKAGES BETWEEN SDG-5 & OTHER SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are interdependent, and progress in one goal often accelerates outcomes in others. **SDG 5 (Gender Equality)** occupies a central position within this framework and advancing gender equality generates multiplier effects across several SDGs.

SDG 1 (No Poverty):

Gender equality is closely linked with **SDG 1 (No Poverty)**. Women are disproportionately affected by poverty due to lower labour force participation, wage gaps, and limited access to productive assets. Enhancing women's economic empowerment increases household incomes, improves resource allocation towards health and education and helps break intergenerational cycles of poverty.

SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being):

Progress in SDG 5 also strengthens **SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being)**. Women's autonomy in healthcare and reproductive decisions leads to improved maternal and child health outcomes. Reducing gender-based violence further contributes to better physical and mental well-being, reinforcing overall health sustainability.

SDG 4 (Quality Education):

The relationship between **SDG 5 and SDG 4 (Quality Education)** is mutually reinforcing. Gender equality ensures equal access to education for girls, while educated women contribute to higher labour participation, delayed marriage, and better child outcomes, creating long-term human capital gains.

SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth):

Gender equality is essential for **SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth)**. Increased female labour force participation and reduced wage disparities enhance productivity, expand the labour base, and promote inclusive growth. Women's leadership also improves organisational efficiency and innovation.

SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities):

Finally, SDG 5 is integral to **SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)**. Gender inequality intersects with income, social, and regional disparities. Empowering women reduces within-household and societal inequalities, fostering inclusive development.

In sum, **SDG 5 acts as a catalyst rather than an outcome of development.** Without addressing gender inequality, progress towards other SDGs remains partial and unsustainable. Integrating gender equality across development policies is therefore essential for achieving sustainable and inclusive growth.

7. STATUS OF GENDER EQUALITY IN INDIA: EVIDENCE FROM SDG-5 INDICATORS

| Targets | Indicators | Target | 2020-21 | 2023-24 |
|--|---|--------|---------|---------|
| End Discrimination against Women | Sex ratio at birth | 950 | 899 | 929 |
| Eliminate all forms of violence against women | Percentage of ever married women aged 18-49 years who have ever experienced spousal violence (physical/sexual) | 0 | 19.54 | 29.2 |
| | Rate of crimes against women per 100,000 women | 0 | 62.4 | 66.4 |
| Full and effective participation in leadership and decision-making | Percentage of elected women over total seats in the state legislative assembly | 50 | 8.46 | 9 |
| | Proportion of women in managerial positions including women in board of directors in listed companies (per 1000 persons) | 245 | 190 | 210.24 |
| | Percentage of currently married women (aged 15-49 years) who usually participate in three household decisions | 100 | - | 88.7 |
| Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights | Percentage of currently married women aged 15-49 years who have their demand for family planning satisfied by any modern method | 100 | 72 | 74.1 |
| Ensure women's equal rights to economic resources | Percentage of female operated operational land holdings | 50 | 13.96 | 13.96 |
| | Ratio of female to male Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) (15-59 years) | 1 | 0.33 | 0.48 |
| | Ratio of female to male average wage/salary earnings received among regular wage/salaried employees | 1 | 0.74 | 0.76 |
| Promote Women's Empowerment through Technology | Percentage of women (aged 15-49 years) who own a mobile phone that they themselves use | 80.63 | - | 53.9 |

Source: *SDG India Index and Dashboard 2023–24*. Government of India

7.1 Sex Ratio at Birth

India's sex ratio at birth improved from **899 in 2020–21 to 929 in 2023–24**, indicating a gradual movement towards gender balance. However, the ratio remains well below the SDG target of **950**, reflecting the continued prevalence of son preference and gender-biased practices. This demographic imbalance has long-term consequences for women's social status, marriage markets, and overall social stability, thereby undermining sustainable development.

7.2 Experience of Spousal Violence

The proportion of ever-married women experiencing spousal violence increased from 19.54 per cent to 29.2 per cent, moving further away from the zero-tolerance target. Rising domestic violence highlights serious gaps in social protection and gender justice mechanisms. Gender-based violence adversely affects women's physical and mental well-being, limits their economic participation, and weakens social cohesion.

7.3 Rate of Crimes Against Women

Crimes against women increased from **62.4 to 66.4 per 100,000 women**, indicating worsening safety conditions. High crime rates reflect systemic gender insecurity and ineffective enforcement. Safety concerns restrict women's mobility, education, and employment, thereby undermining sustainable and inclusive development.

7.4 Percentage of Elected Women in State Legislative Assemblies

Women's representation in State Legislative Assemblies increased marginally from 8.46 per cent to 9 per cent, remaining far below the target of 50 per cent. Low political representation limits women's influence on policy priorities, governance processes, and resource allocation. Enhancing women's political participation is therefore essential for gender-responsive and inclusive governance.

7.5 Proportion of Women in Managerial Positions

The proportion of women in managerial positions increased from **190 to 210.24 per 1000 persons**, yet remains below the target of **245**. Underrepresentation of women in leadership positions reflects the "glass ceiling" effect. Limited female leadership restricts inclusive decision-making and weakens institutional diversity, which is essential for sustainable economic governance.

7.6 Women's Participation in Household Decision-Making

About **88.7 per cent** of currently married women participate in key household decisions, showing relatively better performance though still below the target of **100 per cent**. While progress is evident, the remaining gap indicates persistent gender hierarchies within households. Decision-making autonomy is closely linked to improved health, nutrition, and education outcomes, making it crucial for social sustainability.

7.7 Demand for Family Planning Satisfied by Modern Methods

The proportion of currently married women whose demand for family planning is satisfied increased from **72 per cent to 74.1 per cent**, but remains below the universal target of **100 per cent**. Incomplete access to reproductive health services limits women's control over fertility and health outcomes. This affects maternal health, labour force participation, and intergenerational well-being, thereby constraining sustainable development.

7.8 Percentage of Female-Operated Operational Landholdings

Female-operated landholdings remain stagnant at **13.96 per cent**, far below the target of **50 per cent**. Limited land ownership among women reflects unequal inheritance rights and patriarchal property systems. This restricts women's access to productive assets, credit, and agricultural decision-making, reinforcing rural poverty and economic vulnerability.

7.9 Ratio of Female to Male Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR)

The female-to-male labour force participation ratio improved from **0.33 in 2020–21 to 0.48 in 2023–24**, indicating progress, yet remains far from parity target of **1**. Low participation reflects structural barriers such as unpaid care responsibilities, lack of flexible work arrangements, and restrictive social norms. The underutilisation of women's labour constrains economic growth and inclusive development.

7.10 Ratio of Female to Male Average Wage/Salaried Earnings

The female-to-male wage ratio increased marginally from **0.74 to 0.76**, showing that women earn about three-fourths of male earnings in regular employment. Persistent wage gaps arise from occupational segregation, discrimination, and concentration of women in low-paying jobs, limiting economic independence and poverty reduction.

7.11 Women Owning and Using a Mobile Phone

Only **53.9 per cent** of women aged 15–49 own and use a mobile phone, compared to the target of **80.63 per cent**. The digital gender divide restricts women's access to information, financial services, education and employment opportunities. Limited digital

inclusion undermines women's empowerment in an increasingly technology-driven economy.

The SDG 5 indicators reveal **incremental progress but persistent structural gender inequalities** across demographic, economic, social, and political dimensions. These inequalities reinforce poverty, limit human capital utilisation, and weaken India's progress towards sustainable development. Strengthening gender equality is therefore not optional but essential for achieving inclusive and long-term development goals.

8. POLICY INTERVENTIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION GAPS IN ACHIEVING SDG 5 IN INDIA

India's approach to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 involves a wide range of policies and legal measures addressing its multiple targets. However, a target-wise examination reveals a recurring pattern: most interventions focus on visible outcomes rather than dismantling the structural foundations of gender inequality. This section critically categorizes these policy responses and highlights their implementation gaps.

8. 1. Ending Discrimination and Harmful Practices

This cluster seeks to eliminate discriminatory laws and harmful social practices such as son preference and child marriage.

Policy Interventions:

The flagship initiative is the *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)* scheme, which combines conditional cash transfers and awareness campaigns to improve the child sex ratio and promote girls' education. It is complemented by the *Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006*, and legal provisions addressing dowry-related practices.

Implementation Gaps & Structural Challenges:

These policies largely operate as corrective responses to symptoms rather than as transformative mechanisms. BBBP incentivizes the survival and education of girls but does not challenge the economic logic of patrilineal inheritance that sustains son preference. In the absence of strong enforcement of daughters' inheritance rights and joint property titling, the financial devaluation of girls continues. Similarly, child marriage laws are weakened by entrenched social norms and inadequate grassroots enforcement, allowing the practice to persist informally.

8.2. Ensuring Economic Participation and Resource Rights

This dimension focuses on women's participation in the economy, leadership roles, and equal access to economic resources.

Policy Interventions:

Key initiatives include entrepreneurship and credit schemes such as *Mahila E-Haat*, *Stand-Up India*, and *MUDRA loans*; workplace inclusion measures like the *Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017* and the *Companies Act, 2013* mandate for women directors; and skill development through *Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana*.

Implementation of Gaps & Structural Challenges:

These interventions overlook a central structural constraint—the unpaid care economy. While skilling and credit schemes encourage labour market entry, they ignore women’s disproportionate responsibility for domestic and care work. The absence of affordable childcare services and policies promoting shared household responsibilities, such as paternal leave, limits the effectiveness of employment initiatives. Moreover, microcredit through Self-Help Groups emphasizes debt over asset creation. The stagnation of female-operated landholdings at 13.96 per cent reflects the failure to ensure asset ownership under SDG Target, thereby constraining genuine economic autonomy.

8.3. Eliminating Violence and Ensuring Reproductive Autonomy

These targets address women’s bodily integrity, freedom from violence, and control over reproductive decisions.

Policy Interventions:

India has an extensive legal framework, including the *Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005*, and stringent laws against sexual violence. Health-related initiatives include *Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY)* for maternal support and *Mission Parivar Vikas* for family planning.

Implementation Gaps & Structural Challenges:

A wide gap exists between legal provisions and their enforcement. Implementation is hampered by inadequate staffing of protection officers, social stigma that discourages reporting, prolonged judicial processes, and insensitive law enforcement practices. Rising reports of spousal violence suggest that legal measures alone cannot counter a culture that normalizes violence as a form of control. In reproductive health, while PMMVY improves service utilization, it does not necessarily enhance women’s autonomous decision-making, which remains constrained by patriarchal household norms.

8.4. Enhancing Technology Access and Empowerment

This target promotes women’s access to enabling technologies, particularly ICT.

Policy Interventions:

The *Jan Dhan–Aadhaar–Mobile (JAM)* trinity, especially women’s bank accounts under *Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY)*, along with digitally connected SHGs, aims to advance financial and digital inclusion.

Implementation Gaps & Structural Challenges:

The key divide lies between access and effective use. Despite increased account ownership, the gender gap in mobile phone ownership (53.9 per cent) persists. Digital illiteracy, lack of technical support, and restrictive social norms limit women’s independent use of technology. Most technology policies assume a gender-neutral user and fail to address the specific risks and constraints women face.

8.5. Women’s Political Participation

This target is central to inclusive decision-making across governance levels.

Policy Intervention & Fundamental Gap:

A major policy absence is the non-enactment of the *Constitutional (108th Amendment) Bill, 2008* (Women’s Reservation Bill), which proposes 33 per cent reservation for women in Parliament and State Legislatures. While reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions have yielded positive outcomes, they have not been extended to higher levels.

Structural Challenge:

This legislative inertia both reflects and reinforces patriarchal political power. Women’s low representation (around 9 per cent in state assemblies) ensures that institutions shaping gender policies remain male-dominated, perpetuating gender-blind governance and structural inequality.

9. WAY FORWARD: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING SDG-5 IN INDIA**9.1 Mainstreaming Gender Equality through Gender-Responsive Planning**

Achieving SDG 5 requires a shift from fragmented, welfare-based interventions to structural and transformative policy approaches. Gender equality must be mainstreamed across all development policies through gender-responsive planning and budgeting, ensuring public expenditure addresses women’s needs in employment, health, education, and safety. Integrating gender perspectives into policymaking enhances efficiency, equity, and accountability in development outcomes.

9. 2 Strengthening Women's Economic Empowerment and Reforming the Care Economy

Women's economic empowerment must go beyond skill development to address systemic labour market barriers. Expanding affordable childcare, promoting flexible and safe work environments, and recognising unpaid care and domestic work are essential for increasing female labour force participation. Strengthening women's access to productive assets, particularly land and property rights, is also crucial for long-term economic security and reducing gender-based vulnerability.

9.3 Enhancing Women's Autonomy, Health, and Protection from Violence

Improving women's autonomy and health requires integrating reproductive health services with broader empowerment strategies that promote informed decision-making and bodily autonomy. Legal frameworks addressing violence against women must be supported by effective enforcement, survivor-centric institutional mechanisms, and preventive interventions aimed at transforming discriminatory social norms.

9.4 Advancing Women's Political and Institutional Empowerment

Women's political and institutional empowerment should be enhanced by increasing their representation in legislative and decision-making bodies. This must be supported through leadership development, capacity-building initiatives, and institutional environments that enable women to influence governance and policy priorities.

9.5 Strengthening Data Systems, Monitoring, and Accountability

Strong data systems and SDG monitoring mechanisms are vital for tracking progress, identifying gaps, and ensuring accountability. Timely, disaggregated data can support evidence-based policymaking and improve institutional responsiveness to gender inequalities.

10. CONCLUSION

The analysis demonstrates that while India has made measurable progress towards SDG- 5, gender inequality remains deeply embedded across economic, social, and political spheres. Persistent gaps in labour force participation, wage parity, asset ownership, political representation, safety, and digital access continue to limit women's empowerment and constrain sustainable development outcomes. The study underscores that gender equality is not merely an outcome of development but a prerequisite for achieving inclusive growth,

poverty reduction, and human capital enhancement. Policy interventions have largely addressed surface-level outcomes without challenging underlying structural constraints such as unpaid care work, patriarchal norms, and unequal access to resources. Strengthening gender-responsive planning, economic empowerment, political participation, and data-driven accountability is therefore essential for translating SDG 5 commitments into meaningful and sustainable development outcomes in India.

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