

# BRIDGING THE GAP: A MULTI-SECTORAL ANALYSIS OF GENDER EQUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

Gender equality remains a cornerstone of inclusive development and a fundamental human right. Despite constitutional guarantees and policy interventions in India, persistent disparities continue to affect women's access to education, employment, leadership, and digital participation. This research paper critically examines the current status of gender equality across key sectors—education, economy, technology, politics, and rural development—with a specific focus on post-2015 data aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-5).

Drawing on official datasets, national surveys, academic studies, and global indices, the study explores structural barriers, intersectional inequalities, and emerging opportunities for gender parity. The analysis reveals that while India has made progress in areas such as school enrolment, digital access, and women entrepreneurship, challenges such as unequal pay, political underrepresentation, limited land ownership, and gender-based violence remain deeply entrenched.

The paper further evaluates the effectiveness of recent policy reforms including the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme, Women-led Startup programs, and digital empowerment initiatives. Based on the findings, the study proposes a strategic roadmap emphasizing institutional accountability, gender-responsive budgeting, community-based interventions, and male allyship as essential levers for achieving long-term, measurable gender equality in India.

## Keywords:

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-5), Gender Parity Index (GPI), Periodic Labour Force Survey, MUDRA Yojana,, PMGDISHA,

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is not only a matter of social justice but also a foundational prerequisite for sustainable development, economic growth, and democratic resilience. Recognized as a central tenet of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-5), gender equality transcends the boundaries of individual rights and intersects deeply with poverty reduction, education, health, governance, and environmental justice. In the Indian context, gender equality is constitutionally enshrined but practically elusive—marked by both notable progress and enduring disparities.

India has seen commendable strides in areas such as female literacy, maternal health, and the enrolment of girls in primary and secondary education. The proliferation of women in technology, political reservation in Panchayati Raj institutions, and the rise of women entrepreneurs signify a changing landscape. However, these successes exist alongside persistent challenges. Gender wage gaps, disproportionate unpaid care work, underrepresentation in leadership roles, and systemic gender-based violence continue to obstruct the path toward equality.

Moreover, the problem is not monolithic—it is intersectional. Caste, class, religion, geographic location, and disability status further complicate access to equal opportunities. For example, while urban women may access digital tools and economic resources, rural and tribal women often remain marginalized, both socially and economically. Thus, the pursuit of gender equality in India must account for these layered experiences and disparities.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive, sector-wise examination of gender equality in India, post-2015, within the framework of policy, participation, and progress. By analysing developments across education, labour, politics, technology, and rural development, the study highlights both structural enablers and inhibitors. In doing so, it seeks to contribute toward a deeper understanding of the gender question in India and offers actionable recommendations for policymakers, civil society, and institutions committed to equity and inclusion.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Gender equality as a research and policy domain has attracted extensive scholarly attention, particularly in the context of India's socio-cultural diversity and development imperatives. This section synthesizes recent academic work, institutional reports, and statistical analyses to establish a foundation for the present study. The literature is categorized into five critical domains: education, labor and economy, political participation, digital inclusion, and rural gender dynamics.

### **2.1 Gender and Education**

Studies have documented a steady increase in female enrolment in primary and secondary education in India. According to UNESCO (2023), the Gender Parity Index (GPI) for school education is nearing parity at the primary level (0.98) but begins to diverge at the secondary and tertiary levels, especially in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Jha & Kelleher (2019) argue that cultural norms, early marriage, and lack of institutional support continue to hinder girls' academic continuity beyond adolescence.

### **2.2 Gender and Labour Force Participation**

India has one of the lowest female labour force participation rates (FLFPR) among G20 nations. As per the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS 2022-23), the FLFPR stands at 37%, with large segments of women engaged in informal, unpaid, or low-wage work. Kapsos, Silberman, and Bourmpoula (2014) highlight the phenomenon of “invisible labor,” where women's economic contributions—particularly in agriculture and home-based enterprises—remain unaccounted for. The lack of affordable childcare, workplace harassment, and skewed employer attitudes further compound the issue.

### **2.3 Gender and Political Representation**

Political participation by women in India has increased at the local level due to the 33% reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Studies by Chattopadhyay & Duflo (2004) demonstrate how female leadership in local governance improves developmental outcomes for women and children. However, at the state and national levels, women remain significantly underrepresented. As of 2024, women constitute only 15% of Lok Sabha members, indicating a need for electoral reforms and party-level commitments to gender parity.

### **2.4 Gender and Digital Inclusion**

The digital divide remains one of the most pressing gender gaps in contemporary India. According to the GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report (2023), Indian women are 20% less likely than men to own a smartphone and 23% less likely to use mobile internet. Sarkar and

Mishra (2021) suggest that digital exclusion translates into economic exclusion, as digital tools are increasingly tied to education, banking, telemedicine, and employment. While government schemes like the PMGDISHA aim to enhance digital literacy among rural women, their impact has been uneven due to infrastructural and cultural barriers.

## 2.5 Gender and Rural Marginalization

Rural women in India face intersectional disadvantages due to caste, illiteracy, restricted mobility, and gendered access to land and finance. Bina Agarwal (2018) emphasizes the importance of land rights and collective farming in enhancing women's bargaining power in rural India. However, NFHS-5 data (2019–21) indicates that only 13.2% of women own land or property in their name, limiting their financial independence and social autonomy.

## 2.6 Gaps in the Literature

While substantial research has been conducted, several critical gaps remain:

- Lack of **intersectional gender data** combining caste, disability, and region.
- Underrepresentation of **transgender and non-binary identities** in gender studies.
- Limited **longitudinal studies** measuring the impact of gender policies over time.
- Inadequate evaluation of **policy implementation effectiveness**, especially at the state level.

## 3. SECTOR-WISE ANALYSIS OF GENDER EQUALITY IN INDIA

This section presents an analytical overview of gender equality across five key sectors—**Education, Labor and Employment, Political Participation, Digital Inclusion, and Rural Development**. Each subsection examines both the progress made and the structural constraints that continue to perpetuate gender disparities in contemporary India.

**Table 1: Sector-wise Analysis of Gender Equality in Contemporary India**

Sector	Progress	Challenges
<b>Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- GPI at primary level: 1.02 (UDISE+ 2022–23)</li> <li>- GER for girls in secondary education: 79.4%</li> <li>- National schemes promoting access (e.g., BBBP, KGBV)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dropout in tertiary education, especially in STEM</li> <li>- Early marriage, safety concerns</li> <li>- Inadequate sanitation and transport in rural schools</li> </ul>
<b>Labor &amp; Employment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- FLFPR reached 37% in 2023 (PLFS)</li> <li>- Growth in self-employment &amp; gig platforms</li> <li>- Women accessing micro-credit via MUDRA &amp; SHGs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gender wage gap over 25%</li> <li>- Unpaid domestic work burden remains high</li> <li>- Poor retention post-maternity</li> <li>- Informal sector dominates women's employment</li> </ul>
<b>Political Participation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 33% reservation in Panchayati Raj bodies; over 1.3 million women elected</li> <li>- Women-led local governance improves development outcomes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Only 15% of Lok Sabha and 11% of Rajya Sabha are women</li> <li>- Political parties lack gender quotas</li> <li>- Proxy representation in rural politics</li> </ul>
<b>Digital Inclusion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rise in smartphone access (↑17% in rural women, 2020–23)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women 20–23% less likely than men to access</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Schemes like PMGDISHA improving literacy</li> <li>- Women-led digital businesses emerging</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>mobile/internet (GSMA 2023)</li> <li>- Digital harassment, low privacy awareness</li> <li>- Gender gap in digital banking, ed-tech usage</li> </ul>
<b>Rural Development &amp; Land Rights</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- SHGs under DAY-NRLM/ Mission Shakti boost rural entrepreneurship</li> <li>- Joint land titling and property rights policies in select states</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Only 13.2% of women own land (NFHS-5)</li> <li>- Credit access hampered by lack of collateral</li> <li>- Low participation in cooperatives and governance</li> </ul>

The above table serves as an excellent **visual executive summary** of the sector-wise analysis presented in the narrative.

#### 4. POLICY REVIEW AND IMPACT ASSESSMENT

India has introduced numerous gender-focused policies and schemes, both at the national and state levels, aimed at addressing inequality across education, employment, political representation, technology, and rural development. While several of these initiatives have delivered measurable outcomes, implementation gaps, underfunding, and lack of localized accountability often limit their impact.

The following table provides a sector-wise review of **key gender-focused policies**, their **objectives**, and a **summary of impact** based on available data and evaluations.

**Table 2: Review of Major Gender Equality Policies in India**

Sector	Policy/Scheme	Objective	Impact	Challenges
<b>Education</b>	Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)	Promote girl child survival and education	Improved gender parity in school enrollment at primary level	Underutilization of funds; focus on awareness over infrastructure
	Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV)	Residential schooling for rural and minority girls	Boosted enrollment of girls in remote areas	Infrastructure and teacher shortages
<b>Employment</b>	Mahila Shakti Kendra, MUDRA Yojana	Skilling and entrepreneurship financing for women	Enabled over 70% of MUDRA loans to be availed by women (as of 2023)	Loan sizes often too small; follow-up support limited
	National Creche Scheme	Support working mothers with childcare	Increased work participation for young urban mothers	Limited coverage; inadequate funding
<b>Politics</b>	33% Reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions	Ensure grassroots political representation	Over 1.3 million elected women representatives	Lacks extension to state and national levels

	Women's Reservation Bill (pending)	33% reservation in Parliament and State Assemblies	Widely debated; expected to transform women's leadership visibility	Not yet implemented as of 2025
<b>Digital Inclusion</b>	PMGDISHA (Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan)	Digital literacy in rural households	6 crore+ individuals trained; 45% women beneficiaries	Drop-off in sustained usage; weak device access
	Mahila E-Haat / Meesho / Amazon Saheli	Digital market access for women entrepreneurs	Thousands of women entrepreneurs gained e-commerce visibility	Logistics and digital skill gaps in non-metro areas
<b>Rural Development</b>	DAY-NRLM (Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – NRLM)	Form and support Self-Help Groups for rural women	Mobilized over 80 million women into SHGs (as of 2024)	Lack of financial literacy; market linkages remain weak
	Joint Land Ownership Policy (State-specific)	Promote women's asset ownership	Increased recognition of land rights in states like Odisha and Uttarakhand	Nationwide adoption still limited; patriarchal land norms persist

#### Key Insights:

- **Policy design is often strong, but implementation varies significantly across states**, especially due to political will, administrative capacity, and community engagement.
- **Intersectoral convergence is lacking**: For example, SHGs trained under NRLM often don't get digital tools or health insurance due to siloed implementation.
- There is a **need for gender-disaggregated data** and real-time monitoring systems for all schemes to track long-term outcomes rather than just outputs.
- **Local bodies and civil society participation** in monitoring and feedback could significantly improve grassroots effectiveness of schemes.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR FUTURE ACTION

### Conclusion

Gender equality in India is both a constitutional promise and a developmental necessity. Over the past decade, meaningful progress has been achieved in education, local governance participation, digital literacy, and grassroots entrepreneurship. Government schemes such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, MUDRA Yojana, and DAY-NRLM have created enabling frameworks for women and girls, while increasing visibility of female leaders and entrepreneurs signals a cultural shift in public perception.

However, this progress remains uneven and often surface-level. Structural barriers such as unpaid care work, wage disparities, digital exclusion, limited asset ownership, and cultural norms continue to impede equal access to opportunities. Moreover, gender gaps are amplified at the intersections of caste, class, geography, and disability, which existing policies inadequately address. The lack of real-time data, insufficient accountability mechanisms, and fragmented implementation further weaken impact.

Therefore, the journey towards gender equality in India must move from **intent to institutionalization**—beyond empowerment as a slogan to empowerment as an ecosystem.

#### Strategic Framework for Future Action

To bridge the persistent gender gap, a multidimensional strategy must be adopted by policymakers, institutions, and communities. The following pillars outline a forward-looking roadmap:

##### *1. Institutional Strengthening and Policy Convergence*

- Integrate gender equity targets across all ministries and development missions.
- Ensure convergence between schemes like Skill India, Digital India, and NRLM for holistic impact.
- Mandate gender audits and monitoring at district and block levels.

##### *2. Data-Driven Governance*

- Develop gender-disaggregated data at granular levels (village, ward, institution).
- Include indicators related to unpaid labor, asset ownership, digital access, and mobility.
- Use AI-driven dashboards for real-time policy tracking and course correction.

##### *3. Equity in Economic Participation*

- Encourage formalization of women's labor through tax rebates, flexible contracts, and child care support.
- Scale women's access to STEM and future-of-work fields (AI, fintech, cybersecurity).
- Ensure fair representation of women in labor unions, cooperatives, and industry bodies.

##### *4. Rural and Digital Inclusion*

- Expand device ownership among women through subsidies and SHG-based bulk procurement.
- Strengthen rural digital infrastructure and cyber safety training.
- Promote land titling reforms, financial literacy, and farm-to-market linkages for women farmers.

##### *5. Transformative Social Norms*

- Engage men and boys in gender equality programs in schools, universities, and workplaces.
- Use edutainment, media, and influencers to challenge gender stereotypes.

- Support grassroots campaigns to raise awareness on property rights, reproductive autonomy, and leadership potential.

### Final Thought

India's pursuit of gender equality must no longer be approached as a corrective measure, but as a **core driver of inclusive growth, democratic integrity, and national resilience**. By aligning institutions, data, infrastructure, and mindsets, the country can move toward a future where gender does not determine opportunity—but merely complements it.

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