

INCLUSIVE GROWTH AND SDG 5: STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONS THROUGH WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Author & Co-author:
Ms. Nidhi Patel¹ & Ms. Vishwa Trivedi²

Abstract:

Inclusive growth is a foundational principle of sustainable development, ensuring that economic progress translates into equitable opportunities and social justice for all sections of society. Among the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), SDG 5 achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls occupies a central role in strengthening democratic institutions and advancing rule of law. This research paper examines the interrelationship between inclusive growth and SDG 5, focusing on how women's empowerment contributes to institutional resilience, accountability, and good governance.

The study analyses constitutional mandates, international legal frameworks, and national policies that promote gender equality, including legal safeguards against discrimination, violence, and economic exclusion. It evaluates how women's participation in political decision-making, economic systems, and public institutions enhances transparency, reduces corruption, and fosters participatory governance. Further, the paper highlights structural barriers such as patriarchal norms, wage gaps, limited access to education, and underrepresentation in leadership that impede inclusive institutional development.

By adopting a doctrinal and analytical research methodology, the paper argues that women's empowerment is not merely a social objective but a legal and institutional necessity for sustainable and inclusive growth. Strengthening institutions through gender-responsive laws and policies is essential to achieving long-term economic stability, social equity, and democratic legitimacy. The findings underscore that advancing SDG 5 is instrumental in building inclusive institutions capable of delivering justice, equality, and sustainable development.

This paper examines the relationship between women's empowerment and institutional strengthening within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality). It argues that inclusive growth is unattainable without robust institutional mechanisms that ensure women's equal participation in political, economic, and social spheres. Through a doctrinal and analytical study of constitutional provisions, statutory frameworks, and international commitments, this research evaluates how gender-inclusive policies enhance institutional accountability, transparency, and development outcomes. The paper concludes that women's empowerment is not merely a social objective but a structural necessity for sustainable institutional growth.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Inclusive Growth, Patriarchal Society

1.1. Introduction:

Inclusive growth has emerged as a central paradigm in contemporary development discourse, emphasizing not only economic expansion but also equitable distribution of opportunities, resources, and benefits across all segments of society. In the global agenda for sustainable development, inclusivity is recognized as essential to social justice, democratic governance, and long-term economic stability. The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by the United Nations marked a significant shift toward

¹ Faculty of Law, Anand College of Legal Studies, Anand

² Faculty of Law, Anand Law College, Anand

integrating economic, social, and institutional objectives within a unified framework. Among the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), SDG 5 achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls stands as a transformative goal that directly influences institutional strength and inclusive development.

Gender equality is not merely a social aspiration but a constitutional and human rights imperative. Women constitute nearly half of the global population, yet they continue to face systemic barriers in accessing education, employment, property rights, political participation, and decision-making processes. Persistent gender disparities weaken institutional legitimacy, undermine democratic participation, and restrict economic productivity. In this context, SDG 5 operates as both a standalone goal and a cross-cutting objective that influences the achievement of other SDGs, particularly those relating to poverty reduction, economic growth, and strong institutions.

Strong institutions are fundamental to sustainable and inclusive growth. Effective governance structures depend upon representation, accountability, transparency, and equal participation. Women's empowerment enhances these institutional qualities by promoting diverse leadership, responsive policymaking, and inclusive legal frameworks. Empirical evidence suggests that increased participation of women in legislative bodies, judiciary systems, and administrative institutions contributes to improved governance outcomes, reduced corruption, and more equitable policy design.

This research paper examines the interrelationship between inclusive growth and SDG 5 from a legal and institutional perspective. It explores how constitutional provisions, international conventions, and national legal reforms promote women's empowerment as a mechanism for strengthening democratic institutions. The study also addresses structural and socio-cultural challenges that hinder gender parity and evaluates policy measures aimed at achieving substantive equality. By analyzing women's empowerment as both a development strategy and a legal obligation, this paper argues that strengthening institutions through gender-inclusive governance is indispensable for realizing inclusive growth and sustainable development.

1.2. Research Objectives:

- **To examine the concept of inclusive growth** and its significance within the framework of the 2030 Agenda adopted by the United Nations.
- **To analyze SDG 5 (Gender Equality)** as a transformative goal that influences institutional strength, democratic participation, and sustainable development.
- **To evaluate constitutional and legal provisions** that promote women's rights, equality before law, and protection against discrimination.
- **To assess the role of international legal instruments**, including:
 - Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
 - United Nations Women in advancing women's empowerment and institutional accountability.
- **To examine the impact of women's participation** in political, judicial, and administrative institutions on governance outcomes such as transparency, accountability, and reduction of corruption.
- **To identify structural and socio-legal barriers** that hinder women's full participation in economic and institutional decision-making processes.
- **To suggest policy and legal reforms** aimed at strengthening institutions through gender-responsive governance and inclusive development strategies.

- **To establish the linkage between women’s empowerment and sustainable institutional growth**, demonstrating that gender equality is essential for achieving inclusive and resilient institutions.

1.3. Research Questions

- How does the achievement of SDG 5 (Gender Equality) contribute to strengthening legal and institutional frameworks for inclusive growth?
- What is the conceptual relationship between inclusive growth and gender equality within the framework of the 2030 Agenda adopted by the United Nations?
- How do constitutional provisions and national legal systems promote women’s empowerment as a mechanism for institutional development?
- What role does the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women play in advancing gender-responsive governance and institutional accountability?
- What structural, socio-cultural, and economic barriers continue to hinder the effective implementation of SDG 5?
- How can legal reforms and policy interventions be designed to ensure that women’s empowerment leads to sustainable and inclusive institutional growth?

1.4. Literature Review

1.4.1 Inclusive Growth: Conceptual and Legal Perspectives

Scholars acknowledge that economic growth alone does not guarantee equitable development unless it is inclusive and addresses systemic inequalities. Sen (1999) argues that development must expand substantive freedoms for all, emphasizing that economic metrics alone are insufficient for evaluating societal progress. Inclusive growth, according to Klasen (2010), requires equitable access to resources, opportunities, and capabilities among disadvantaged groups including women. Legal scholarship by De Schutter (2013) emphasizes that inclusive growth is also a matter of legal accountability, requiring States to embed equality principles in constitutions, legislation, and public policy.

1.4.2. Gender Equality and SDG 5

There is a growing body of literature on SDG 5’s role in achieving sustainable development. **UN Women (2018)** highlights that gender equality fosters stronger economies, improves social outcomes, and enhances institutional legitimacy. **Kabeer (2016)** underscores the interdependence between gender justice and economic outcomes, arguing that empowerment extends beyond labor force participation to decision-making roles and social norms transformation. Legal scholars such as **Charlesworth and Chinkin (2000)** emphasize that international human rights instruments like the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)** are essential for translating normative commitments into domestic legal frameworks.

1.4.3. Women’s Empowerment as a Catalyst for Institutional Strengthening

Empirical research suggests that women’s participation in governance structures positively impacts institutional quality. **World Bank (2012)** finds that increased women’s representation in political decision-making correlates with improved public goods provision and reduced corruption. **Grown, Gupta & Kes (2005)** argue that women’s economic empowerment enhances accountability in financial systems and promotes inclusive policy outcomes. Legal analyses by **Htun and Weldon (2012)** show that women’s

engagement in legislative processes leads to more gender-responsive laws and institutional reforms that benefit broader social groups.

1.4.4. Barriers to Women's Empowerment

Despite legal frameworks, gender inequalities persist due to structural and socio-cultural barriers. **Razavi and Miller (1995)** highlight that patriarchal norms, limited access to education, and discriminatory labor markets impede women's economic and political participation. **Bardhan and Khasnobis (2006)** argue that legal reforms are often ineffective without social transformation, noting the persistence of informal discriminatory practices. **Merry (2006)** analyzes how legal rights on paper do not always translate into meaningful empowerment due to weak enforcement mechanisms and institutional inertia.

1.4.5. Intersectionality and Inclusive Institutions

Recent scholarship emphasizes intersectional analysis, noting that women's experiences of inequality differ based on class, caste, ethnicity, and disability. **Crenshaw (1991)** introduces intersectionality as a critical analytical tool for understanding how overlapping identities result in compounded discrimination. **Yuval-Davis (2011)** extends this to institutional contexts, arguing that effective governance must address multiple axes of exclusion. These perspectives enrich the literature by highlighting that empowerment strategies must be inclusive beyond gender to reinforce institutional resilience.

1.4.6. Legal and Policy Evaluations

Several studies evaluate the effectiveness of legal frameworks in advancing gender equality. **Tripp (2006)** finds that constitutional guarantees and affirmative action policies increase women's political participation in several African countries. **Baldez (2004)** shows that electoral quotas lead to measurable increases in women's representation, though impact varies by context. **Agarwal (1994)** critically examines land rights, noting that legal reforms often fail to shift deep-rooted property norms that exclude women from economic empowerment.

1.4.7. Identified Gaps and Contribution of Current Research

While existing literature highlights the importance of inclusive growth and gender equality, there remains a gap in explicitly linking SDG 5 with institutional strengthening through a **legal lens**. Most studies focus on economic outcomes or political representation independently, without integrating constitutional mandates, international obligations, and institutional accountability frameworks. Moreover, limited research explores how legal reforms that promote women's empowerment can directly enhance governance quality and institutional efficacy.

This research aims to fill these gaps by providing a doctrinal and analytical examination of:

- The legal basis for linking women's empowerment with stronger institutions.
- The effectiveness of international and national legal mechanisms in operationalizing SDG 5.
- Policy recommendations for embedding gender-inclusive approaches in institution-building strategies.

1.5 International Legal Framework

1.5.1. The Charter of the United Nations (1945)

The UN Charter lays the foundational commitment to equal rights of men and women. Article 1 emphasizes promoting respect for human rights without discrimination, while the Preamble reaffirms faith in fundamental human rights and the equal rights of men and women. This foundational principle forms the normative basis for later gender-specific conventions and sustainable development goals.

1.5.2. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

Although not legally binding, the UDHR is a cornerstone of international human rights law. Articles 1 and 2 guarantee equality and non-discrimination, while Articles 7, 21, and 23 ensure equality before the law, equal participation in governance, and equal pay for equal work. These provisions directly relate to women's empowerment and institutional inclusivity.

1.5.3. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

CEDAW is often described as the “international bill of rights for women.” It imposes binding obligations on States Parties to eliminate discrimination against women in political, economic, social, and cultural spheres.

Key provisions relevant to strengthening institutions include:

- Article 7: Ensuring women's participation in political and public life.
- Article 10 & 11: Equal access to education and employment.
- Article 15: Equality before the law.

CEDAW requires States to adopt legislative and policy measures to ensure substantive equality, thereby reinforcing institutional accountability and inclusive governance.

1.5.4. Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995)

Adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Beijing Platform for Action identifies 12 critical areas of concern, including women in power and decision-making, institutional mechanisms for advancement of women, and human rights of women. It emphasizes mainstreaming gender perspectives in institutional and policy frameworks.

1.5.5. United Nations Women (UN Women)

Established in 2010, UN Women plays a central role in promoting gender equality globally. It supports member states in implementing gender-responsive laws, strengthening institutions, and ensuring compliance with international obligations related to women's rights.

1.5.6. 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and SDG 5

The 2030 Agenda integrates gender equality as both a standalone goal (SDG 5) and a cross-cutting principle across all SDGs. SDG 5 aims to eliminate discrimination, violence, harmful practices, and unequal participation in leadership and decision-making.

Importantly, SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) complements SDG 5 by emphasizing accountable and inclusive institutions. Together, these goals establish a normative linkage between women's empowerment and institutional strength.

1.5.7. Regional Human Rights Instruments

Regional frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women Optional Protocol (1999), and regional human rights charters in Europe, Africa, and the Americas further reinforce accountability mechanisms, enabling individuals to seek remedies for violations of women's rights.

1.5. Indian Legal and Constitutional Framework

1.5.1. Constitutional Provisions

- Article 14 – Equality before law
- Article 15(3) – Special provisions for women
- Article 16 – Equal opportunity in public employment
- Article 39(a) & (d) – Equal right to livelihood and equal pay

1.5.2. Legislative Measures

- The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961
- The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013
- The Companies Act, 2013 (mandatory woman director provision)
- The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976

1.5.3. Political Representation

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments provide reservation for women in Panchayats and Municipalities, significantly strengthening grassroots institutions.

1.6. Women's Empowerment and Institutional Strengthening

1.6.1. **Governance Institutions:** Research shows women leaders often prioritize education, health, and welfare, strengthening institutional legitimacy.

1.6.2. **Economic Institutions:** Increased female labour force participation boosts GDP and enhances productivity. Corporate gender diversity improves decision-making quality.

1.6.3. **Judicial and Administrative Institutions:** Gender-sensitive adjudication promotes access to justice and institutional credibility.

1.7. Challenges

- **Weak Implementation of Gender Laws:** Even though countries like India have progressive laws (e.g., Domestic Violence Act, POSH Act), implementation remains weak.
- **Institutional Patriarchy & Structural Bias:** Institutions often reflect societal biases. Underrepresentation of women in judiciary, police, legislature, Gender stereotypes in legal reasoning, Male-dominated decision-making structures
- **Intersectionality & Marginalized Women:** Not all women experience inequality in the same way. Compounded discrimination faced by, Rural women, Tribal women, Women with disabilities, LGBTQ+ women. Laws often fail to address intersectional discrimination adequately.
- **Weak Institutional Accountability Mechanisms:** Institutions responsible for protecting women often lack: Monitoring systems, Transparency, Gender audits, Data disaggregation. Without gender-sensitive institutional reforms, SDG 5 targets remain theoretical.
- **Inadequate Awareness & Legal Literacy:** Many women are unaware of their rights. Legal empowerment begins with awareness, but institutional outreach remains limited.
- **Digital Gender Divide:** In the era of digital governance - Limited internet access for women, Cyber harassment, Lack of digital literacy. This prevents equal participation in e-governance and digital legal services.
- **Gender-Based Violence (GBV) & Institutional Failure:** United Nations reports high global rates of gender-based violence. Institutional weaknesses include Police insensitivity, Poor victim support systems, Forensic and investigative gaps. GBV directly undermines inclusive growth and SDG 5 progress.

- **Political Underrepresentation:** Although local governance shows progress, higher political offices remain male-dominated. Institutional strengthening requires more women judges, Women police officers, Women bureaucrats, Women legislators. Without representation, inclusive policy-making remains incomplete.

1.8. Recommendations

- Strengthen enforcement mechanisms of gender-equality laws.
- Expand reservation policies to Parliament and State Legislatures.
- Promote gender budgeting in public institutions.
- Encourage corporate gender diversity beyond minimum compliance.
- Integrate SDG monitoring into domestic legal frameworks.
- Enhance Women's Political & Judicial Representation
- Strengthen Gender Budgeting & Financial Accountability
- International Cooperation & SDG Monitoring

1.9. Conclusion

Inclusive growth cannot be achieved without substantive gender equality. Sustainable Development Goal 5, as adopted by the United Nations, recognizes that women's empowerment is not merely a developmental objective but a foundational requirement for sustainable and just societies. However, despite progressive constitutional guarantees and legislative frameworks in countries such as India, the persistence of structural inequalities, institutional bias, weak enforcement mechanisms, and socio-economic barriers continues to hinder the realization of gender justice.

This research highlights that the relationship between inclusive growth and women's empowerment is deeply institutional in nature. Institutions whether judicial, administrative, economic, or political play a decisive role in translating legal promises into lived realities. Where institutions remain patriarchal, inaccessible, or unaccountable, gender equality remains aspirational. Conversely, gender-responsive institutions foster participation, protect rights, enhance economic productivity, and strengthen democratic governance.

Strengthening institutions through women's empowerment requires a shift from symbolic representation to structural reform. Legal empowerment must extend beyond statutory enactments to include effective implementation, gender-sensitive adjudication, financial commitment through gender budgeting, intersectional policy design, and accountability mechanisms aligned with SDG monitoring frameworks. Enhancing women's representation in decision-making bodies, improving access to justice, and bridging the digital and economic gender divide are essential components of this transformation.

Ultimately, inclusive growth must be understood not only in economic terms but as a constitutional and human rights imperative. A society that excludes half its population from full participation cannot claim institutional strength or sustainable progress. Therefore, achieving SDG 5 is inseparable from strengthening institutional frameworks that uphold equality, dignity, and non-discrimination. Women's empowerment is not an auxiliary agenda; it is the cornerstone of equitable governance and sustainable development.

In conclusion, the path toward inclusive growth lies in reimagining institutions as instruments of gender justice. Only through accountable, inclusive, and gender-responsive institutions can the vision of SDG 5 be fully realized, ensuring that development is both sustainable and truly inclusive.

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