Integrating Gender Equality into Sustainable Development Goals: Evaluating the Role of Women in India's Progress

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Abstract

Gender equality is a stand-alone objective under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 and a cross-cutting accelerator for the entire 2030 Agenda. This paper evaluates India's progress by examining how gender concerns are integrated across SDGs relating to poverty, health, education, decent work, climate action, and strong institutions, and by assessing how women's agency, access to resources, and institutional representation shape development outcomes. Drawing on global SDG target architecture and Indian indicators—such as NFHS-5 measures of decision-making and inclusion, female labour-force participation trends, and the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023 reserving one-third of seats for women—the paper argues that India can unlock substantial economic, social, and environmental dividends by closing gender gaps. It proposes a 2026–2030 roadmap focused on building care systems, enabling safe and decent work, strengthening leadership pipelines, and mainstreaming gender-responsive climate policy, supported by measurable monitoring and accountability tools.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, Gender Equality, Climate Justice; Women's Leadership; Gender Budgeting.

1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) articulate a universal agenda to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity and peace for all by 2030. For India—home to a large and youthful population, and a society characterized by regional, linguistic, religious, and socio-economic diversity—the SDGs are both a national development framework and a global responsibility. Within this architecture, SDG 5 (gender equality) holds special significance because it is simultaneously a goal in its own right and a multiplier across other goals. When women and girls are free from discrimination and violence, can access education, health care, finance, and decent work, and participate meaningfully in decision-making, societies tend to experience stronger and more inclusive growth, improved human capital, and more resilient environmental management.

SDG 5 targets codify the multidimensional nature of gender equality. They address discrimination and violence against women and girls; harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage; recognition and redistribution of unpaid care work; women's full participation and leadership; universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights; equal rights to economic resources such as land, property and financial services; the use of enabling technology, including ICTs; and gender-responsive laws and policies. Integrating these targets into sectoral plans for health, education, labour markets, climate, and justice is essential because gender inequality is not confined to one policy domain. It is produced through the interaction of institutions (family, school, workplace, state), markets (employment, credit, land), and

social norms (mobility, care roles, safety), and it shapes the distribution of opportunities throughout the life cycle.

India has enacted important constitutional commitments to equality and has expanded access to schooling and health services over time. Yet constraints remain persistent: women's labour-force participation is relatively low, women's ownership of productive assets remains limited in many regions, unpaid care responsibilities remain heavily gendered, and gender-based violence continues to undermine mobility and well-being. These constraints are intensified by intersecting inequalities of caste, class, disability, and rural-urban location. A meaningful evaluation of India's SDG progress therefore requires understanding how gender is mainstreamed across multiple goals and how women's contributions to development can be strengthened through law, policy, and institutional design.

2. India's Gender–SDG Baseline: Gains, Gaps and Trajectories

India's baseline for gender-integrated SDG progress shows a blend of positive movement and stubborn gaps. National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21) indicates that women's participation in household decision-making is high in many states, and that access to bank accounts and personal mobile phones has improved. These developments matter because they reflect both practical autonomy and the ability to access services and opportunities—whether it is receiving benefits directly, communicating with markets and employers, or seeking information about health and education. At the same time, NFHS-5 highlights uneven outcomes across states and communities: asset ownership (land/house) and cash-paid work remain comparatively low for many women, and digital inclusion still displays gendered gaps.

Female labour-force participation (FLFP) remains an especially consequential indicator because it shapes household income, macroeconomic growth, and women's autonomy. Global evidence suggests that expanding women's economic participation can raise output and reduce poverty; for India, even incremental improvements in FLFP can yield large aggregate gains given the size of the working-age population. Yet women's labour-market participation is constrained by unpaid care burdens, safety and mobility barriers, occupational segregation, skill mismatches, and limited access to decent work opportunities, particularly in districts where industrial and service-sector ecosystems are thin.

India's legal and institutional environment is also evolving. The Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023—often referred to as the Women's Reservation Act—reserves one-third of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, including within Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe seats. Its implementation is linked to the publication of the next census and delimitation. While not yet operational, India's long experience with reservation in Panchayati Raj institutions and urban local bodies suggests that women's representation can shift governance priorities toward social infrastructure, improve responsiveness to citizen needs, and gradually reshape political norms. Together, these indicators and reforms define the starting conditions and levers for accelerating gender-integrated SDG delivery between now and 2030.

3. Framework for Integration: Agency, Resources and Representation

To understand how gender equality fits into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this paper uses a simple three-pillar approach: agency, resources, and representation.

Agency refers to a woman's ability to make decisions about her own life—her autonomy, control over her body, freedom of movement, and ability to speak up or lead.

Resources include education, skills, health services (including reproductive health), financial access, property, technology, time, and supportive networks. Representation means having women present and influential in institutions that make rules, allocate budgets, and shape public policy—such as legislatures, government departments, corporate boards, unions, and climate-governance bodies.

These three elements strengthen each other. For example, when affordable childcare and essential services are available (a resource), women can take up paid work (agency) and participate in public decision-making (representation). When women are represented in local bodies or legislatures, they often advocate for better public services and social infrastructure, which then expands other women's resources and opportunities. But when women's representation is only symbolic or when they lack basic resources, progress in agency slows down. This framework shows why SDG 5 cannot be viewed separately from the rest of the SDG agenda—it is interconnected with every other goal.

4. Integrating Gender Equality across Priority SDGs in India

Gender mainstreaming becomes meaningful only when SDG goals are translated into actionable policies and when progress is tracked through gender-segregated data. In India, four SDG clusters are particularly important for advancing gender equality:

Poverty and Inequality (SDG 1 and SDG 10)

Health and Education (SDG 3 and SDG 4)

Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8)

Climate Action (SDG 13)

Each area highlights how women's empowerment is essential for sustainable development.

4.1 SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)

Poverty affects women and men differently because their access to property, income, and time is unequal. Women's economic stability improves when social protection reaches them directly, when they can own or co-own assets, and when they can turn their skills into paid work without being held back by heavy care responsibilities.

India can address gendered poverty by: promoting joint ownership of land and housing,simplifying inheritance rules, strengthening grievance-redress systems, linking women's livelihood schemes to markets and public procurement.

An often-ignored factor is time poverty. When women spend most of their day on unpaid care work—childcare, cooking, eldercare, collecting water or fuel—they have little time for paid employment or education. Treating care as essential infrastructure is therefore crucial. This includes childcare centres, community kitchens where appropriate, and expanding access to clean energy, water, and sanitation to reduce drudgery.

4.2 SDG 3 (Health) and SDG 4 (Education)

Health and education lay the foundation for all other forms of empowerment. India has made progress in primary education and maternal healthcare, but challenges intensify during adolescence. Concerns about safety, early marriage, limited access to secondary schools, and the digital divide lead many girls to drop out. Improving outcomes requires: safe transport, better school infrastructure, clean toilets and menstrual hygiene support, community engagement to shift restrictive norms.

In health, women need universal access to sexual and reproductive health services, quality maternal care, and adolescent health programmes. Nutrition and anaemia remain major barriers. Strengthening primary healthcare, improving continuity of care, and promoting health and digital literacy— including mental-health awareness—can yield far-reaching benefits. Universities and training institutions can support these goals by integrating gender awareness, financial literacy, and entrepreneurship in their curriculum and by creating smoother school-to-work pathways for young women.

4.3 SDG 8(Decent Work and Economic Growth)

India's economic growth depends on increasing productivity and creating more and better jobs. Women's participation in the workforce is essential for this. Even a small rise in female labour-force participation can significantly boost household incomes and national economic output.

However, women are largely employed in informal, low-paid, and insecure work without social protection. The aim must be not only more jobs for women but better and safer jobs.

Key barriers include:

expensive or unavailable childcare, unsafe commuting, discriminatory hiring practices, wage gaps, lack of social insurance. Policy responses should focus on:

enforcing equal pay, strengthening workplace safety and anti-harassment systems, extending social security to gig and informal workers, supporting apprenticeships and skills training in emerging sectors (green energy, digital services, healthcare), expanding markets for women-led MSMEs through procurement incentives.

4.4 SDG 13 (Climate Action) and Environmental SDGs

Climate change affects women and men differently. Women often face greater burdens related to water scarcity, energy poverty, food insecurity, and migration because of social norms and unequal access to resources. Yet women are also crucial contributors to adaptation and mitigation efforts—whether in climate-smart agriculture, renewable energy, waste management, or local environmental governance.

Integrating gender into climate planning requires: ensuring women's representation in climate-planning bodies, designing climate-finance schemes that support women-led enterprises, using gender-specific indicators to track benefits and burdens, ensuring that community-level programmes do not increase unpaid work for women. States can strengthen climate planning by embedding gender in their climate-action plans, livelihood missions, and urban sustainability programmes. When women participate meaningfully in climate governance, programmes become more locally relevant, equitable, and long-lasting.

5. Case Illustrations and Legal–Policy Context in India

India offers practical examples that illustrate how gender-responsive interventions can generate development gains. Kerala's Kudumbashree programme demonstrates the transformative capacity of women's collectives when they are institutionally supported. By integrating neighbourhood groups with micro-enterprises, governance participation, and social services, the programme has supported livelihoods, improved social status, and strengthened community resilience.

The Self-Help Group (SHG)–Bank linkage movement similarly shows how financial inclusion can translate into empowerment when combined with complementary supports such as skilling, market access, digital tools, and legal literacy. Credit alone rarely transforms outcomes; durable empowerment emerges when women can access markets, protect their rights, and build networks that improve bargaining power.

Legal and constitutional commitments provide a further enabling framework. Articles 14–16 ground equality and non-discrimination. The Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023 reserves one-third of seats for women in Parliament and State Assemblies, including within SC/ST seats; seats rotate after delimitation and the reservation endures for at least fifteen years. Alongside such reforms, India's programme architecture includes schemes focused on girls' education and survival, community capacity building, financial inclusion and entrepreneurship, and rural employment guarantees. The challenge is to strengthen execution quality—convergence across departments, robust grievance redress, and gender budgeting that connects allocations to outcomes.

6. Gender Equality as a Governance Reform

Gender equality should be understood not only as a social goal but also as a governance reform that improves how institutions function. Where women have voice and representation, public policies are more likely to address everyday infrastructure—water, sanitation, health outreach, schooling quality, and community safety—that determines whether households can convert public services into well-being. For India, integrating gender into SDG delivery therefore requires mainstreaming gender analysis into planning, budgeting, procurement, and evaluation. Gender budgeting, for example, is most effective when it links allocations to measurable outcomes such as reductions in time poverty, increases in women's labour-force attachment, or improvements in girls' secondary completion. Likewise, procurement can act as an equality lever by setting standards for workplace safety in supply chains and by creating market access for women-owned enterprises.

The legal system plays a parallel role. Effective enforcement of equality norms, workplace protections, and remedies for violence to determine whether formal rights become real capabilities. University legal aid clinics, district legal services authorities, and community organizations can work together to spread legal literacy on property rights, labour rights, and access to government schemes. In addition, local institutions—panchayats, SHG federations, and municipal bodies—can function as platforms for participatory planning and social accountability. When gender-responsive institutions are built at these levels, SDG implementation becomes more resilient and more responsive to the communities it serves.

Persistent Challenges and the 2026–2030 Roadmap

Despite progress, persistent challenges continue to impede gender-integrated SDG delivery. Care deficits create time poverty and depress women's employment and earnings. Occupational segregation and leadership bottlenecks restrict advancement and limit influence over policy and budgets. Gender-based violence undermines safety, mental health, and labour-force attachment. Data gaps—especially on time use, unpaid work, and gendered climate outcomes—reduce the ability to design targeted interventions and to evaluate effectiveness. Financing constraints also matter: without adequate investment in care infrastructure, safety systems, and women's skilling, progress may stall.

The roadmap for 2026–2030 requires a systemic, coordinated approach. Care services should be scaled through universal childcare and eldercare hubs integrated into local development plans and co-financed by public and private actors. Labour-market reforms must focus on safe and decent work, strengthening equal pay enforcement, workplace safety and POSH compliance, and social security coverage for informal and gig workers. Leadership pipelines should be strengthened through capacity building, mentorship, and transparent selection processes, leveraging the momentum of women's political reservation. Climate governance must mainstream gender through women's representation, dedicated climate-finance windows for women-led initiatives, and gender-taggedindicators within adaptation and mitigation programmes.

Implementation architecture is critical. Inter-departmental Gender–SDG cells at Union and state levels can coordinate schemes and budgets. Annual SDG-5 scorecards can track progress, combine administrative and survey data and highlighting regional disparities. Capacity building for local governments, frontline service providers, and institutions (including universities and legal aid clinics) can support awareness, rights realization, and policy feedback.

6.1 Measuring Progress: From Inputs to Outcomes

A recurring weakness in gender mainstreaming is the gap between policy inputs and lived outcomes. Monitoring should therefore distinguish between (a) inputs (budget allocations, number of centres, training sessions), (b) outputs (services delivered, beneficiaries reached), and (c) outcomes (changes in women's time use, safety, earnings, asset ownership, and voice). For example, childcare centres are an input; the number of children served is an output; the change in women's labour-force attachment and income stability is an outcome. Similarly, digital inclusion programs must be evaluated not only by the number of devices distributed, but by women's sustained and independent use of phones and digital payments, and by whether this reduces transaction costs and increases market participation. Outcome measurement also requires attention to intersectionality. State-level averages can mask large disparities for women from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, minority communities, women with disabilities, and women in remote rural areas. Disaggregation by region, caste, income, age and urban/rural location is therefore central to equitable SDG progress. Finally, monitoring must be coupled with accountability—timely grievance redress, third-party audits, and corrective action when schemes fail to reach intended groups.

7. Conclusion

Integrating gender equality into the SDGs determines whether development is inclusive, resilient, and sustainable. India's legislative momentum and improving indicators provide a platform, but success requires translating commitments into functional care systems, safe and decent work opportunities,

leadership pathways, and gender-responsive climate action, anchored in financing and measurement. Empowering women as economic actors, community leaders, and policymakers multiplies returns across SDGs by improving household welfare, strengthening institutions, and enhancing environmental stewardship. With sustained political commitment and evidence-based policy integration, India can accelerate progress toward the 2030 Agenda while ensuring that development gains are shared equitably across society.

Foot Notes:

[1] UN Women, SDG 5 targets and narrative overview (accessed Feb. 18, 2026).

[2] UN DESA, Goal 5 portal and targets/indicators (accessed Feb. 18, 2026).

[3] NFHS-5 syntheses on decision-making, asset ownership, paid work and digital inclusion (2019–21).

[4] World Bank Gender Data Portal—India: female and male labour-force participation, 2024 update.

[5] PRS Legislative Research—Women's Reservation Bill / Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023 (seat reservation, rotation, implementation).

[6] UN Women and UN DESA target formulations linking leadership, care recognition and economic rights under SDG 5.

[7] IMF/WEF syntheses on returns to gender parity in work and leadership (2019–2023). [8] UN Women facts and figures on economic empowerment, care work and poverty (2024).

[9] NFHS-5 and World Bank indicators on bank accounts, mobile access and women's asset ownership.

[10] UN DESA/UN Women SDG 5 targets on SRHR and leadership; UNICEF/UN notes on adolescent risks and early marriage.

[11] World Bank and NFHS-5 syntheses linking education, health autonomy and labour outcomes (2019–2024).

[12] IMF/WEF notes on GDP gains from narrowing gender participation gaps (2023).

[13] World Bank Gender Data Portal—India: female vs. male labour-force participation (2024).

[14] ILOSTAT and Moody's Analytics on leadership gaps and productivity benefits of parity (2023–2024).

[15] UN Women climate–gender briefs (2025).

[16] UNFCCC—Gender Action Plan; SBI/2022/7 synthesis on gender-differentiated impacts.

[17] User-uploaded Indian studies (2017–2025) on empowerment–sustainability linkages.

[18] World Bank/NFHS-5/ILOSTAT indicators on financial inclusion, employment and mobility constraints.

[19] PRS Legislative Research—Women's Reservation Act/106th Amendment: reservation, rotation, timeline.

[20] UN Women/UN DESA programme linkages on gender and social protection.

[21] UN Statistics—The Gender Snapshot 2023 (poverty projections, care time gaps, financing needs).

[22] UN Women/UNFCCC on risks of gender-blind adaptation and mitigation.

[23] UN Women, ILOSTAT and Moody's Analytics—policy levers and productivity linkages (2023–2024).

[24] UNFCCC/UN Women—gender-responsive climate planning guidance.

[25] UN DESA/UN Women guidance on mainstreaming gender in SDG delivery.

[26] WEF/IMF/UN experience on gender budgeting and accountability (2019–2025).