

# Empowering Women for Sustainable Development: Analysing Constitutional Safeguards and Government Policies

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## Abstract

The concept of Sustainable development rests upon the four pillars: social development, economic growth, environmental conservation, and the safeguarding cultural diversity. Social development, being the most pivotal, aims for building a society where each individual, regardless of their gender, has the opportunity to achieve their full potential. In our journey towards progress, both men and women had played indispensable roles yet, historically there has been a tendency to view women as the ‘weaker’ gender; such perceptions are detrimental to the growth of society as a whole. Undoubtedly, Gender equality is a pre-requisite for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance. The gender inequality remains pervasive and had been hindering social advancement and national progress; the empowerment, autonomy, augmentation of political, social, economic and health status of women is a crucial end, in itself. By empowering women and unleashing their potential, one can pave the way for a brighter and equitable future that benefits entire of humanity. To foster global development, we must promote increased female engagement, acknowledge shortcomings, and effectively implement policies. Governments around the world are implementing various initiatives and programs to promote women's empowerment. The legal steps taken for women's empowerment are pivotal for fostering a fairer, more inclusive society. The purpose of this paper is an attempt to examine and analyse the constitutional safeguards, social and economic policies implemented by the government for sustainable progress of women.

**Keywords:** Women empowerment, Gender equality, Sustainable development, Constitutional safeguards, Government policies.

## 1. Introduction

In present times various Government, Inter-Government and Non-Government organizations have appreciated the role that Gender equality is expected to play in realization of national as well as Global development. Needless to underscore that women, who are treated as the retrograde gender, play a key role in the development of the country and hold the potential for contributing significantly in various sectors such as education, health, business and administration. The historic imprints of inferior treatment have always hindered women from achieving their full potential and such imprints needs to be vanished, by aggressively undertaking actions for their true empowerment and offering equal access to opportunities, resources and decision-making processes. Women empowerment aims to enable women

to have greater control over their lives and to make their own decisions; be it economic, political process or any personal decision related to their own health and well-being.

The Indian Constitution provides many provisions to undo the repercussions of second grade treatment offered to women in past. The Constitution guarantees to promote gender equality, including fundamental rights and provisions for equal pay, maternity benefits and non-discrimination. In addition, the government has implemented various policies and initiatives for Women, which aimed at improving their status and participation in society. Despite significant efforts in recent decades, women in India continue to face various challenges, including limited access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and political representation.

On the contrary, the issue of Women empowerment have gained ground on global arena as the world has begun to realise that the scope of women empowerment is not restricted to the purview of justice but transverse to the sphere of sustainable development that fosters inclusive economic growth, social growth and resilience. Accordingly, the need of women empowerment finds a pivotal place in United Nations Sustainable Development Goals i.e. SDG- 5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. The concept of Sustainable development dwells upon the intricate relationship of social development, economic growth, environmental conservation, and cultural diversity in overall holistic development. Evidently, a key dimension of sustainable development is sustainable social development, which aims to improve the well-being of individuals and communities, ensuring access to basic needs such as health, education and employment opportunities and promoting social cohesion and inclusion. Certainly, Gender equality and hence, the Women empowerment holds high stake in achievement of sustainable social development. Empowering women and girls, would not only close the gender inequality matrix but would also open up their potential, as agents for change.

India, being no exception, could pave the way for a fairer and more prosperous society as well as fulfil the Sustainable Development Goal No. 5, by the addressing the issue of gender gap and promoting the active participation of women in all sectors.

## **2. Women Empowerment in Indian Context**

The Ancient archives of India reveal that during pre-vedic period, women were treated at par with men. They had access to education, held respectable positions and were included in political decision making process, as well. The existence of female Vedic scholars like, Lopamudra, Indrani and Vishwavara stands testimony to this fact.

But over the period of time the status of women retrograded, particularly with emergence of social evils like such as Sati pratha, child marriage and prohibition on widow marriage. However, social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Acharya Vinobha Bhave, and worked against such derogatory practices and fought for abolishing cruel practices like sati and child marriage. Similarly, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar advocated for widow remarriage, resulting in the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. Women's education received attention, with pioneers like Savitribai Phule opening schools for girls.

In modern India, activists like Padma Shri Smt. Sunitha Krishnan and social entrepreneurs like Arunachalam Muruganantham, have been working to empower women in India. Simultaneously, the country's efforts are being supplemented by vocational training and skill development projects, undertaken by United Nations Development Program (UNDP), for enabling young women. Despite such efforts, the Women empowerment in India has not been uniform. It is significantly influenced by

factors like geographical location (urban or rural), social status (caste and class), educational attainment, and age. Nevertheless, women face disparities across multiple sectors such as education, economic opportunities, access to healthcare, and political participation, highlighting substantial gaps between policy initiatives and their actual implementation, at the grassroots level.

### 3. Sustainable development through women empowerment

As already emphasised, women empowerment significantly contributes to sustainable development, both nationally and globally, by augmenting the economic growth, social development and environmental sustainability. Additionally, women's empowerment leads to the improvement of social justice and human rights statistics, which contributes constructively to the stabilization and sustainability of societies and nations. On Social front, empowered and educated women are more likely to ensure that their children attend school and receive adequate health care. The UNESCO emphasizes that every additional school year for women reduces child mortality by 5-10 percent. It is also reported that representation of women in leadership positions leads to more inclusive decision-making processes.

As regards economic development, an interesting study by the Peterson Institute for International Economics, observed that companies with more women in leadership positions tend to have better financial results. In concordance with said, the McKinsey Global Institute has estimated that advancing women's equality worldwide could add \$12 trillion to global GDP by 2025. Similarly, the World Bank recognizes the role of increased women's labour force participation in boosting economic growth by increasing productivity as well as in reducing poverty. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), also recognized the profound economic impact of that empowered women in India could have on nation's GDP and estimated that India's GDP could grow by 27 percent if women participated in the workforce as much as men.

From the foregoing, the conclusive and direct relationship between national/ global development and women empowerment is evident. It is thus appropriate to hold that women empowerment holds the key to sustainable development of societies, nations and global peace as well.

### 4. Constitutional provisions for women empowerment:

The Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties, and Directive Principles of the Indian Constitution all uphold the idea of gender equality. In addition to granting women equality, the Constitution gives the State the authority to enact laws that promote positive discrimination against men. Our laws, development strategies, plans, and programmes have all targeted women's advancement in various fields within the framework of a democratic society.

#### Social empowerment

- A. Article 15(1): The state shall not discriminate against any citizen of Indian on the ground of sex.
- B. Article 15(3): The state is empowered to make any special provision for Women. In other words, this provision enables the state to make affirmative discrimination in favor of Women.
- C. Article 39(a): The state to secure for men and Women equally the right to an adequate means of livelihood.
- D. Article 51-A(e): It shall be the duty of every citizen of India to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of Women.

#### Economic empowerment

- a. Article 16: There shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or

appointment to any office under the state.

- b. Article 39(a): The state to secure for men and Women equally the right to an adequate means of livelihood.
- c. Article 39(d): Equal pay for equal work for both men and women
- d. Article 42: The state shall make provisions for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief.

### **Political Empowerment**

- a. Article 243D(3): Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by relation to different constituencies in a Panchayat.
- b. Article 243D(4): Not less than one-third of the total number of offices of the Chairpersons in the panchayats at each level to be reserved for women.
- c. Article 243T(3): Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Municipality shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Municipality.

The Indian constitution's provisions for women reflect the country's commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women. The state is duty bound to frame policies in line with above provisions of the Constitution. However, the true vision of the constitution, to foster a society where women can live with dignity, equality and freedom, could only be materialized with collaborative efforts of state, civil society and individuals.

### **5. Laws for women empowerment in India**

In line with the constitutional vision to guarantee equality, the Government of India has implemented various laws to give effect to the directory provisions of the Constitution as well as empowering women. A few worth mentioning legal initiatives includes:

1. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005: This law provides for protection of women from domestic violence and abuse, including physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, and economic abuse.
2. The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961: This act mandates paid maternity leave for women employees for a certain period before and after childbirth to ensure their health and well-being.
3. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013: This act aims to prevent and address sexual harassment of women at workplaces by establishing a mechanism for complaints and redressal.
4. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961: This act prohibits the giving or receiving of dowry, which is a practice that often leads to exploitation and harassment of women.
5. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006: This act prohibits the marriage of girls below the age of 18 and boys below the age of 21, aiming to prevent child marriages and protect the rights of young girls.
6. The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976: This act prohibits discrimination in wages on the basis of gender and ensures equal pay for equal work for both men and women.

7. The Prohibition of Child Labour Act, 1986: While not specific to women, this act helps protect the rights of girl children by prohibiting their employment in certain hazardous occupations.
8. The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986: This act prohibits the depiction of women in a derogatory or indecent manner in advertisements, publications, or other media forms.
9. The Hindu Succession Act, 1956 (amended in 2005): This amendment to the Hindu Succession Act grants daughters equal rights to ancestral property as sons, promoting gender equality in inheritance laws among Hindus.

## 6. Present status of Women in India

Various Constitutional as well as the legal safeguards, implemented by the government of India, there has been a significant improvement in the status of women in India, particularly in recent years. The change in various indicative matrixes, as listed below, indicates a positive movement and fruitfulness of India's efforts:

### Gender inequality index:

In the Gender Inequality Index (GII) 2022 by UNDP, India ranks 108 out of 193 countries. Over the last 10 years, India's ranking in the GII has steadily improved, indicating a gradual improvement in the country's achievement of gender equality. In 2014, it was ranked 127, which has now changed to 108.

### Socio-cultural disparity:

According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), India's sex ratio in 2024 is 1,020 females for 1,000 males. Prior the census which was held in 2011, shows India's total sex ratio was 943 females per 1000 males.

**Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR):** For the years 2018–20, the MMR in India is 97 per lakh live births, as per the latest report of the national Sample Registration system (SRS) data, It has clearly declined by 33 points, from 130/ 100,000 live births in 2014-16.

**Malnutrition:** According to the NFHS-5, 18.7% of women between the ages of 15 and 49 are underweight. There has been a significant reduction in the percentage of underweight women over the years. From 35.5% in NFHS-3 to 22.9% in NFHS-4, and further down to 18.7% in NFHS-5, indicating an improvement in nutritional status.

**Education:** According to NFHS-5 (2019-21), female literacy is 70.3% while male literacy is around 84.7%. A comparison of this data with previous studies shows a steady increase in the level of literacy. For NFHS-4 (2015-16), female literacy was 68.4% and male literacy was 85.7%.

### Economic Disparity

**Employment:** According to the most recent PLFS study, in 2021–2022 only about 32.8% of working-age females (15 years and older) were employed. PLFS data shows a positive trend in employment among working women in India, increasing significantly from 22.8 percent in 2019-20 to 32.8 percent in 2021-22.

**Wage Gap:** India has one of the largest gender wage gaps in the world. The Global Gender Gap Report 2021 states that women in India received, on average, 21% of men's income.

### Political disparity:

According to data compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Women comprises 14.4% in the Lok Sabha. According to the Election Commission of India's (ECI) most recent report, as of October 2021, women made up 10.5% of all members of parliament. The average percentage of female MLAs across all state assemblies is 9%.

India has slipped in this category during the past few years. Right now, it lags behind Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan.

Although significant progress in respect of various parameters, such as literacy, employment and income inequality is reported in context of Indian women, the inequalities still exist. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) 2019-21, 30% of women aged 15-49 have experienced physical violence since age 15. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023 ranks India 127th out of 146 countries, highlighting substantial gaps in economic participation, educational attainment, health, and political empowerment. In the labour market, the female labour force participation rate remains low at around 22% in 2022, as per the World Bank. Furthermore, the representation of women in political roles is limited, with women holding only 14.4% of parliamentary seats in 2023. These statistics underscore the enduring inequalities that Indian women face despite advancements in various areas and simultaneously, act as a ringing bell for the nation to pay urgent attention toward women empowerment at ground level with much more aggressiveness.

### **7. Government Schemes for Women Empowerment in India:**

The government has initiated a number of programmes to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in India. Some of the major programmes for women's empowerment in India are listed below:

#### **Socio-Cultural Empowerment of Women**

The goal of the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Yojana (BBBP) is to guarantee girls' education and empowerment while also working to reduce the child-to-sex ratio. It has resulted in increased awareness and sensitization of the masses regarding prevalence of gender bias and role of community in eradicating it. During the last 6 years the Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB) has improved by 16 points from 918 in 2014-15 to 934 in 2019-20. Gross Enrolment Ratio of girls in the schools at secondary level has improved from 77.45 to 81.32.

Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Yojana (PMSSY) facilitates better access for women and girls to high-quality healthcare services.

One Stop Centres (OSCs): These facilities offer comprehensive support services to women who have experienced violence.

The Nirbhaya Fund was established to provide funding for projects that enhance women's safety.

#### **Economic Empowerment of Women**

Stand Up India Programme: It provides bank loans to women from the Scheduled Castes, Tribes and Minorities so they can start their own businesses.

Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana PMJDY: It makes easier for women to access basic banking services, thereby increasing their involvement in finance.

Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP): It aims to provide skills that enable women to become self-employed/entrepreneurs.

These initiatives have positively impacted women's lives and improved education, health and economic inclusion. For example, BBBP has significantly improved the sex ratio in states like Haryana. However, there are still shortcomings. Despite these schemes, many rural women still face educational and health inequalities due to inadequate infrastructure and social standards. Bridging these gaps will require continued efforts in infrastructure development, social change, and ongoing monitoring and support to ensure the long-term effectiveness of these schemes.

## 8. Conclusion – Building a brighter future

The empowerment of women and gender equality are inextricably related to the achievement of sustainable development. Women have always been perceived as the "weaker" gender, which has limited their potential and impeded societal advancement. Lack of Women's empowerment act as barrier to effective economic expansion, social advancement, better health, and sustainable resource usage, at all levels. The achievement of sustainable development is contingent upon gender equality. Equal chances for women help us build a more just and prosperous future.

Despite global as well as national efforts, major indexes report existence of significant gender inequalities in India and the Indian women continue to confront major obstacles in the areas of healthcare, education, employment, and political representation. To realise the country's full potential, these problems must be resolved.

This is essential to effectively implement socioeconomic policies, legal protections, and gender equality initiatives in their true spirit. There is need to review the existing initiative as well as frame and implement new initiatives, through collaborative efforts of all.

## Way forward

1. Empower women through education, skill development and economic opportunities to enable their full participation in sustainable development efforts.
2. Strengthen enforcement mechanisms for existing legal frameworks to ensure effective implementation.
3. Enhance awareness and sensitization programs to promote understanding of women rights and empowerment
4. Foster collaboration between government, civil society and private sector stakeholders to address gender disparities comprehensively
5. Prioritize research and data collection to inform evidence based policy making and monitor progress towards gender equality

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