

## **EMPOWERING CHANGE: CHALLENGES AND REFORMS IN GENDER EQUALITY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Gender equality is a fundamental human right and the basis of a prosperous, peaceful, and sustainable world. Gender equality encompasses the assurance of equal opportunities, duties, and rights for each and every person in the nation, regardless of gender identification. Discrimination against anyone based on gender is an infringement of the fundamental principle as every human is a creation of God. Gender gap parity is a means of achieving gender equality goals specified in SDG-5 (Sustainable Development Goal). It acts as a cornerstone that prepares the path for women, men and transgender to exercise their rights, actively engage in society, and contribute to sustainable development. This paper aims to state the history and present status of gender equality in India and also the various challenges that contribute to gender inequality and pathways to parity in the form of various initiatives taken by the government. This exploratory study uses secondary data sources for qualitative analysis. The study's conclusion reveals that the Indian government has been making encouraging attempts to reduce gender inequality and bring parity in all domains as part of the process of achieving the SDGs.

**KEYWORDS:** Gender Equality, Gender disparity, Sustainable Development Goal, Women empowerment, Entrepreneurship.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

India is one of the world's largest and fastest-growing economies. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015) places gender equality at the center of its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which form a global strategy to advance both environmental and human prosperity. Gender equality is a fundamental human right for every member of society and is the cornerstone of a peaceful and sustainable world (Belingheri, Chiarello, Fronzetti Colladon, & Rovelli, 2021). Every human deserves to achieve their full potential, but this is made more difficult by a gender disparity in India as India is placed 127th out of 146 nations in the Gender Gap Report 2023 by the WEF (World Economic Forum). Gender equality indicates the roles played by men and women are equally important and necessary for a nation's advancement and development. However, the majority of indicators of human growth, such as literacy rates, constantly show that women lag behind men. Men and women have significantly different literacy rates because girls typically do not attend the same schools as boys. Women are underrepresented in higher-paying positions and frequently earn less money for doing the same work as males. According to the World Inequality Report, 2022, men make up 82% of the labour force in India but women make only 18% of the income. It is almost absurd to think that a nation can develop fully with about half of its people still living in poverty (Madhok, 2014).

The path to gender equality is a transformative one that necessitates a critical assessment of challenges and requires creative approaches that open the door to a more inclusive future. The pervasive existence of societal norms and prejudices that establish traditional roles and expectations for people depending on their gender is one of the main obstacles to achieving gender equality. Gender inequality affects both sexes' lives in India and resulting in unequal chances, statistically, the impoverished are disproportionately affected. It is urgently necessary for countries all around the world to work towards eliminating long-standing gaps and fostering equal opportunities for everyone, regardless of gender.

Gender equality in India refers to the condition of having equal access to various opportunities and resources, including decision-making, economic participation and equally valuing various behaviors, desires, and needs, regardless of gender. In India, establishing parity in all areas of life is the goal of gender equality.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- **Rout (2008)** focused themes are: gender development and agriculture; microcredit funding and women's empowerment; the role of NGOs and Self-help Groups (SHGs) in women's socioeconomic development; and health and women's education.
- **Kumar and Kumar (2009)** concentrate on the advantages of women's entrepreneurship. Enhancing the status of women three important development goals—growth, efficiency, and poverty—can all be influenced by productivity. Significant socioeconomic benefits result from it, including decreased fertility, improved nutrition in the home, and a decline in baby, child, and maternal mortality. Research indicates that women are more likely than men to regulate how much of their income is spent on necessities for the home.
- **Eapen & Mehta (2012)** demonstrate how to achieve growth with inclusivity. The strategy paper for the twelfth five-year plan was analyzed based on gender, and the results indicate that women need to be acknowledged as growth drivers in all spheres of Hindu politics and economics.
- **Thomas (2013)** illustrated gender inequality and contrasted India's experiences with those of other Asian and Western nations.
- **Jha and Nagar (2015)** pinpoint the causes of gender inequality in India as well as its effects on the political, social, cultural, and legal systems. It also explores the difficulties policymakers have in achieving proper gender parity in India and suggests practical solutions to do so while advancing the dignity of Indian women.
- **Mohapatara & Mohapatara (2016)** highlighted the difficulties experienced by transgender people in India, notably when it comes to the recognition of their rights, the denial of equal protection under the law, and socioeconomic discrimination in public spaces and at work.
- **Guha and Samrat (2016)** provide a general summary of the gender budgeting project in India and examine a few associated concerns that must be resolved in order for gender budgeting to be a useful instrument for women's empowerment.
- **Batra et al. (2016)** aims to analyze the causes of gender inequality in India and concludes that HRD could play a major role in spearheading these efforts. Recruitment and selection procedures, training and development programs, and reward systems

could all be aligned through organizational policies and procedures to promote gender equality.

- **Jayachandran (2017)** conducted a presentation on the causes of gender disparity in developing nations. Additionally, this report covered the various ways that a nation's economic growth could enhance women's relative outcomes and close gender gaps.
- **Chaudhary (2018)** attempted to identify the level of gender inequality, work participation, and educational status of women in the Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, India. They also proposed some pertinent strategies that could be implemented to lessen this inequality and support the district's underprivileged women.
- **Esteves (2018)** studied the significance of incorporating a gender perspective into educational curricula that is a great challenge for policy makers. The author also discussed about various European nations that have been creating attempts to include gender equality as a theme or as an interdisciplinary subject in school curricula. The author recommended in order confronting conventional gender roles and stereotypes, educational systems should consider the necessity to incorporate gender discourse into a variety of educational contexts, from teacher preparation to the definition of subject matter.
- **Ferro & Saúde (2021)** examines gender equality in Portugal and emphasizes that, in spite of more initiatives and policies; gender equality is still mostly a formal concept that has not yet been implemented. Thematic analysis was conducted on the data obtained from interviews and focus groups to get a thorough grasp of how gender equality is portrayed in society in the towns under study.
- **Batra & Reio (2022)** analysed the underlying reasons of gender inequality in India and suggests HRD policies including sexual harassment committees, gender-specific restrooms, and safety-assuring transportation practises in order to eliminate gender workplace disparity.
- **Leach and Mehta (2022)** examines the relationship between sustainable development and gender equality, emphasizing the ways in which gender disparities impede the SDGs' advancement. It highlights how crucial it is to incorporate gender viewpoints into the formulation and application of policies in order to promote just and sustainable development.

- **Somani (2022)** conducted a systematic literature review on women empowerment and gender equality in India. The analysis found advancements in areas including female education, a decline in forced and young marriages, and improved representation of women in leadership position.
- **Khanal et al. (2023)** systematically reviews eighteen research publication in order to determine if Indian subcontinental higher education institutions are promoting or reversing caste inequality. The results show that, in spite of government support for Dalit higher education, non-Dalits' discriminatory actions restrict Dalits' ability to pursue an unbiased education. Prejudiced behavior by privileged peers and non-Dalit teachers is causing the exclusion of Dalits from school.
- **Saavedra et al. (2023)** examined the connection between gender disparity and the rise in female obesity in developing nations. The use of compound measures, like BMI, to assess how gender inequality affects health outcomes may obscure more complex processes that are only visible by examining certain aspects of gender inequality, as this article demonstrates. It has been shown that extreme gender disparity has detrimental effects on women's mental health and nutrition, or weight loss, as well as child marriage and mobility constraints.
- **Zampone et al. (2024)** aimed to close the knowledge gap by offering several additions to the body of knowledge on corporate governance and SDG disclosure. This study surveyed a sample of 526 corporations from 39 countries and eleven industry sectors from 2017 to 2020 in an effort to promote accountability for SDGs. The findings highlighted the importance of supplementary communication materials in addition to sustainability and annual reports, such as the CoP created by UNGC member companies.

### III. OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

- A. To study the Present Status of gender equality in India.
- B. To analyze the various Challenges faced in achieving gender equality in India.
- C. To study the Reforms of gender equality taken by the government in the process of achieving the SDGs.

D. To Understand the Balanced Approach of Gender Equality among Men and Women.

#### **IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research done in this article is qualitative in nature. Secondary data is mainly used. Papers, books, reports, journals, magazines, articles, official websites of regulatory authorities, published sources and newspapers are among the research publications from which the study's secondary data has been obtained. Specific keywords including gender equality, sustainable development goals, and women's empowerment were used to search published papers and publications. After reading through the pertinent research articles on financial gender equality that have been published, the aforementioned keywords were chosen. They were initially searched for in the titles of the articles; following that, screened research papers' abstracts were read to prepare them for complete reading. Data was acquired from papers in a few journals that primarily provide a thorough overview of the many issues faced and the measures done to address those challenges which ultimately help in boosting gender equality in India.

#### **V. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

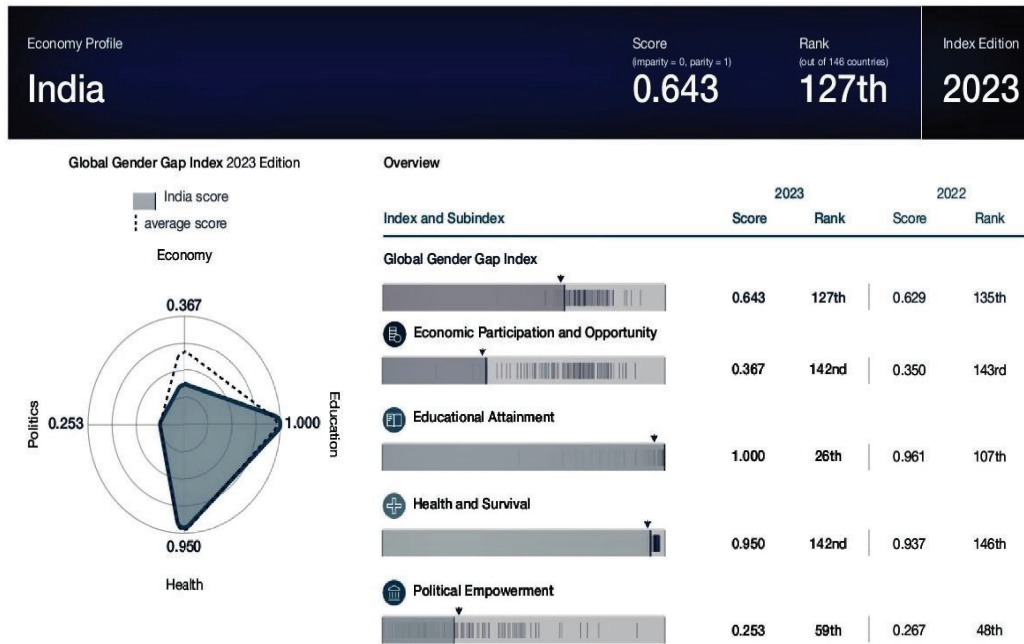
The Biden-Harris administration has published a National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality in order to attain gender equality in both domestic and foreign policy. The approach presents an enormous goal and an intricate programme. The strategy also backs SDG - 5 on gender equality, a target for the empowerment of all women by 2030. The achievement of gender equality in India is necessary for both sustainable development and the realization of human rights. There will be equality between the sexes when both are allowed to participate equally in decisions regarding family and outside matters. Because gender equality gives women the power to make decisions that impact their own health and also the health of others, it is crucial for achieving national and development goals. Gender equality is now more crucial than ever for India to flourish in all respects.

##### **A. Present Status of Gender Equality in India**

The World Economic Forum (WEF) has published the 17th edition of the **Global Gender Gap Report 2023**, which assesses the state of gender parity in 146 nations. Figure 1 shows

this report which clearly mentions gender parity in different nations. It acts as a compass to monitor progress on the relative differences between men and women in terms of health, education, politics, and the economy.

**Figure 1: Gender Parity**



Source: Global Gender Gap Index 2023

- a. India moved up eight spots to position 127 out of 146 nations in the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report 2023. India's ranking will rise starting in 2022.
- b. India has made progress in a number of sectors as seen by the closing of 64.3% of the overall gender gap.
- c. However, just 36.7% of Indians had equal access to economic opportunity and involvement.
- d. India has achieved parity in enrolment across all levels of education as the score rose up from 0.96 to 1.

**Figure 2: Ranking of different countries**

Southern Asia			
Country	Rank		Score
	Regional	Global	
Bangladesh	1	59	0.722
Bhutan	2	103	0.682
Sri Lanka	3	115	0.663
Nepal	4	116	0.659
Maldives	5	124	0.649
India	6	127	0.643
Pakistan	7	142	0.575
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	8	143	0.575
Afghanistan	9	146	0.405

**Source: Global Gender Gap Index 2023**

The figure 2 shows the ranking of different countries at global level and at regional level. It shows the ranking in Southern Asian Countries with respect to gender equality.

- a. Neighboring Countries- Bangladesh came in at number 59, China at number 107, Nepal at number 116, Sri Lanka at number 115, and Pakistan at number 142.
- b. With its gender gap closed to over 90%, Iceland continues to be the nation with the most gender equality.
- c. The second-lowest gender parity among the eight regions was attained in Southern Asia, at 63.4%.
- d. After over a decade, 1.9 percentage point increase in the sex ratio at birth is observed.

Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI) 2023 released by UNDP offers a thorough study of the root causes of gender inequality which hamper the growth for women and girls. Along with political, educational, economic factors it covers physical integrity also. According to more than 40% of people, men are better equipped than women to be corporate CEOs. Surprisingly, 25% of people think it is acceptable for a man to physically beat his wife. Since 1995, the percentage of women serving as heads of state or governments has stayed constant at 10%. Less than one third of managerial jobs on the job market are held by women. Despite major improvements in women's educational attainment, there is still a sizable gender pay gap, with males generally earning 39% more than women.



The reports mentioned about India's economic parity. These studies, however, do not accurately reflect the ground reality. In reality, caste is just one of several reasons why women in India are discriminated against.

## **B. Challenges in Gender Equality**

The elimination of inequalities and the creation of an equitable and inclusive environment for all people, regardless of gender, have long been aspirations of societies all over the world. Though our religious beliefs elevate women to the status of gods, we fail to recognize them as a human being first. We worship goddesses but exploit girls. In contemporary culture, it is idealized that they have attained a position of equality with males, but the sad truth is that they continue to experience various forms of discrimination in their personal and professional life. The path from gender inequality to fairness requires tackling various challenges that continue in several spheres of life.

- a. Societal norms and stereotypes:** Stereotypes and gender roles that are ingrained in nations and cultures, perpetuate inequalities. Women's duties are frequently restricted by societal expectations to housework and child care, whereas men are viewed as the main breadwinners. These misconceptions have an impact on
- b. opportunities, job decisions, and education.**
- c. Pay inequalities and economic empowerment:** The gender pay gap is still a significant issue. Because of occupational segregation, unequal representation in leadership positions, and undervaluation of "feminine" professions, women still earn less than males for doing the same amount of work. India has one of the lowest rates of female labour force participation in 2021 at 23%, significantly lower than the global average of 47%.
- d. Democracy, participation, and leadership:** Women and girls are frequently barred from political leadership and involvement, whether as voters and as candidates, legislators, or decision-makers. Democratic government, peacebuilding, and sustainable development all depend on the voices, perspectives, and interests of women. Women made up 15.1% of MPs in India, demonstrating a 25.3% parity in political empowerment. Notably, women now make up only 40% of municipal government in 18 nations, including India.
- e. Lack of representation in decision-making:** Attempts to establish gender equity are hampered by the under representation of women in positions of decision-making, whether

in politics, business, or other industries. Only 42.3% and 31.7% of females, respectively, reported owning a house and land alone or jointly in the National Family Health Survey. While 51.2% of the women who responded to the survey agreed to have some financial autonomy, but the majority of them had no autonomy in choosing their life partner.

- f. **Harassment and Gender-based violence** : Women's safety, independence, and participation are at risk from gender-based violence, which includes domestic abuse and sexual harassment. These types of violence frequently result from disparities in power and limit the possibility of inclusive societies. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a spike in violence against women and girls, resulting in a "shadow pandemic" of gender-based violence. In terms of incidences per 1 lakh people, the frequency of crimes against women increased from 56.5% in 2020 to 64.5% in 2021, according to the NCRB Report.
- g. **Unequal access to education and healthcare**: Access to high-quality education and healthcare is not equally distributed across all geographic areas. Girls' and women's access to education and basic health care is hampered by discrimination, cultural norms, and financial constraints.
- h. **Cultural and historical context**: Male or female discrimination in India has persisted for many generations and has an impact on both genders' lives. Despite the Indian Constitution's provision of equality for men and women, gender disparities still exist.
- i. **Science and technology**: Both as students and professionals, women and girls are Underrepresented in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Globally only 28% of researchers are women. Additionally, compared to men, women have less access to digital technologies.

## C. Reforms of Gender Equality

In the process of moving toward gender equality, India has implemented numerous important initiatives. The creation of legislation and regulations aiming at defending women's rights and combating gender-based discrimination has been the most important developments. These are some of the reforms:

### a. Legal reforms:

Laws protecting against gender-based violence, harassment, and discrimination have been passed and enforced by governments. These legal frameworks offer a base for promoting equity throughout society.

- Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 (Nirbhaya Act): This law enhanced the scope of sexual assault and tightened the penalty for sexual acts including rape.
- Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act, 1994 (Prohibition of Sex Selection): To address the issue of female foeticide and skewed sex ratios, this act forbids prenatal sex determination and sex- selective abortions.
- Equal Remuneration Act, 1976: This law forbids gender-based wage discrimination and requires equal pay for equal effort.

## b. Economic reforms:

- Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA): provides rural households with a 100- day pay employment guarantee and places a special emphasis on giving women equal opportunities to participate in labor-intensive projects. It gives rural women more economic power.
- Startup India: Offering access to capital, incubation, and support for new businesses, the Startup India initiative promotes women entrepreneurs. Incentives and specific regulations have been put in place to support female-led companies.
- Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY): In order to increase women's employability and economic potential, PMKVY offers skill development training.

## c. Financial reforms:

In order to create an environment where women can participate fully in financial affairs of family and to achieve financial independence, Indian Government has taken several steps-

- Credit Guarantee Fund Scheme for Women Entrepreneurs: The Credit Guarantee Fund Scheme for Women Entrepreneurs lends money to women-owned businesses and startups without requiring collateral. It lowers the risk for financial institutions, so encouraging them to lend to female businesses.
- Maternity Benefit Program: The Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) helps pregnant and lactating women with their healthcare and nutritional requirements. The goal of this effort is to improve mother and child health.

#### d. Political reforms:

- Reservation of Seats in Local Government: One-third of the seats in rural and urban local bodies (Panchayats and Municipalities), as defined by the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Indian Constitution, are reserved for women. This program promotes women's involvement in local politics.
- Reservation of Seats in Parliament and State Assemblies: In India, there are designated seats for women in both the Lok Sabha, the lower house of Parliament and the State Legislative Assemblies. According to the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment, women are entitled to one-third of the seats in Panchayats.

#### e. Equality to transgender:

To safeguard and advance the rights of transgender people in India, the government has implemented a number of legislative changes:

- Transgender people cannot be discriminated against in the workplace, in healthcare, or in public places and also introduced transgender identity card. under The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019.
- A nationwide umbrella programme called SMILE (Support for Marginalised Individuals for Livelihood and Enterprise) has been developed by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment for Welfare of Transgender Persons.

### D. Gender Equality: A Balanced Approach among Men and Women

The quest for gender equality has made significant progress in recent years, but it is important to recognize that true equality means treating men and women equally. When dealing with multiple valid issues, it is important to emphasize a balanced perspective that ensures fairness for all. Marriage, which is often a significant milestone in life, should not be marred by unequal expectations. It is admissible for a woman to be unemployed, but the same is not acceptable in case of men. Financial and relationship pressure should not lie on men only, both sexes should promote shared responsibilities. Government initiatives to uplift women are commendable, but it is important that women use this empowerment responsibly. Abuses of power, such as false allegations of sexual harassment and domestic violence undermine real progress towards equality. Instead, mutual respect and cooperation between the genders should be encouraged. Another pressing issue is society's expectation that men must remain stoic and show no vulnerability. This harmful stereotype perpetuates toxic masculinity. Strength should not be

measured by the ability to suppress emotions, but rather by the tenacity to deal with them openly. The path to true gender equality lies in equal rights for all, regardless of gender. Governments should empower women but without compromising the rights and dignity of men. This balanced approach ensures a society where everyone has the opportunity to grow without gender bias. It's time to reframe our perceptions, challenge stereotypes and create a world of true gender equality.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

Greater gender equality can improve economic productivity, enhance development outcomes and make organisations and policies more representative. However, in order to achieve the general growth of "society," gender imbalance must be addressed and corrective actions taken in both emerging and developed economies. The realisation of women's rights and gender equality depends heavily on women's economic empowerment. It involves giving them more control over their time, lives, and bodies, as well as more voice and meaningful participation in economic decision-making at all levels, from the family to international institutions. It also includes their ability to participate equally in the markets that already exist. This study paper aims to study the history, current scenario of gender equality and to shed light on the complexities that underlie the inequities and act as barriers to an equitable society through an in-depth study of the problems. Understanding the complexity of these issues will help us develop powerful strategies and revolutionary solutions that have the capacity to change social systems, empower people, and create a world where gender equity becomes an undeniable reality.

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