



Achieving Gender Equality through Women Empowerment in India: A Study in the Context of Sustainable Development.

Padmaja Tamuli^{1*}, Dr. Kaushik Mishra²

^{1*} Assistant Professor, Amity School of Communication, Amity University, Kolkata, Newtown, Kolkata-700126 India.

² Assistant Professor, Amity School of Communication, Amity University Kolkata, Newtown, Kolkata-700126 India.

Email: ²kaushikmishra28@gmail.com

Corresponding Email: ^{1*}padmajatamuli88@gmail.com

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Abstract: According to UN data, women and girls constitutes 50% of the world's population and therefore, half of mankind's potential. The 5th Sustainable Development Goal is about achieving gender equality and empowering women. However, existing literature suggests that widespread gender inequality acts as a hinderance to sustainable development. This study aims at uncovering the role of women empowerment in achieving gender equality and thereby ensuring sustainable development in India. Qualitative methodology and secondary sources are employed to collect data. According to published studies, contribution of women work force towards economic development of the country is less compared to men work force. Similarly, in the political sphere men dominates and participation of women in decision making process is comparatively less. Women related violence and crime has increased manifolds in the past decade. Studies also state that women participation in climate change dialogue is also less in India. This study concludes that unless women are not empowered and gender equality is not achieved, women cannot play a significant role in economic, political, social, and environmental spheres. And to achieve sustainable development recognizing only men's contributions will not suffice. Hence, this study tries to draw the attention of the policy makers to commit and work towards women empowerment and utilize the potential of the entire country to attain sustainable development.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Women Empowerment, Gender Equality, Development, Policy Reforms.



1. INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is the very foundation for achieving peace, prosperity, and sustainable development across the globe. Notwithstanding recent advancements, the world is not on schedule to achieve gender equality by 2030 (The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic's social and economic effects have made the situation much worse. According to the UN reports due to the COVID-19 pandemic's impacts, up to 10 million additional girls may marry as children by 2030, in addition to the 100 million girls who were anticipated to be at danger before the pandemic. According to the 2011 census, women make up 48.5% of India's overall population. A study done by Technology and Action for Rural Advancement supported by the UN states that women have been subjected to discrimination in India for many years. A wide range of indicators show this: As of 2011, India's child sex ratio (ages 0-6) was 914 females for every 1000 males, down from 927 in 2001. Despite rising literacy rates, women still trail behind men; as of 2011, just 65.46 percent of females were literate, compared to 82.14 percent of males. Women are subjected to discrimination in a variety of circumstances due to social attitudes and mindsets. Also, existing literature suggests that improved education, self-assurance, and understanding of gender equity are pivotal for women empowerment. Out of the 17 SDGs, the *Goal 5: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower all Women and Girls* calls for achieving gender equality by ending all forms of discrimination against women, and empowering women in all spheres of life. Hence, considering the changing environmental, social, political, and economic dynamics worldwide and especially in India, women's empowerment is highly relevant and significant to attain sustainable development.

Sustainable Development and India:

The concept of sustainable development first came into existence with the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987. The goal of sustainable development is to balance environmental, social, and economic growth (Fig1.). The 2030 Agenda, a new sustainable development roadmap, includes the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a call to action to protect the environment and guarantee human wellbeing on a worldwide scale. To accomplish these shared objectives, people, businesses, governments, and nations from all around the world must actively collaborate.

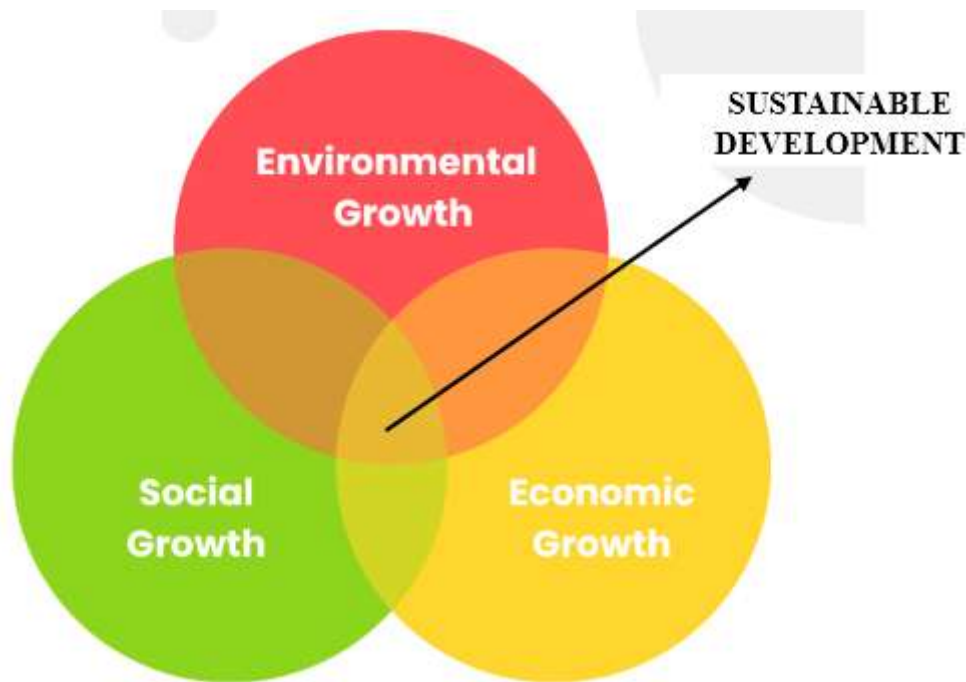


Fig.1.: Components of Sustainable Development

Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi stated at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in 2015, “the world and our beautiful planet will tremendously benefit from the sustainable development of one-sixth of humanity. It will be a world with fewer barriers, more hope, and increased confidence in its accomplishment”. Discussions on the creation of national SDG indicators have been facilitated by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI). Also, state governments are vital to India's development in terms of the SDGs since they are best suited to put citizens first and ensure inclusion of each section of the society. Coordination of the SDGs, mapping of initiatives related to the SDGs and their targets, and selection of lead and supporting ministries for each target are all tasks that fall within the purview of NITI Aayog. The NITI Aayog, Union Ministries, and State Governments receive assistance from the UN Country Team in India in their efforts to develop plans and facilitate for effective execution of the goals for all-round development of the citizens along with financial support.

Women Empowerment and the Indian Scenario:

According to Noble Laureate Dr. Amartya Sen, “nothing, arguably, is as important today in the political economy of development as an adequate recognition of political, economic, and social participation and leadership of women”. Bennet (2002) defines empowerment as “the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them”. And according to Duflo (2011) women’s empowerment means women have equal earning opportunities, political participation and access to other constituents of development like health and Education. Further, Malhotra

et al. (2009) defines women empowerment as the women's ability to make strategic life choices where that ability was previously denied. They also state that empowerment is central to the process of maintaining the benefits of women at individual, household, community, and broader levels. Similarly, Alvarez and Lopez (2013) claim that women empowerment involves the actions of enhancing the status of women through literacy, education, training, and raising awareness. Therefore, the essence of women empowerment lies in enabling women to make decisions pertaining to social, political, economic, and environmental issues that affect their lives profoundly (Fig.2).

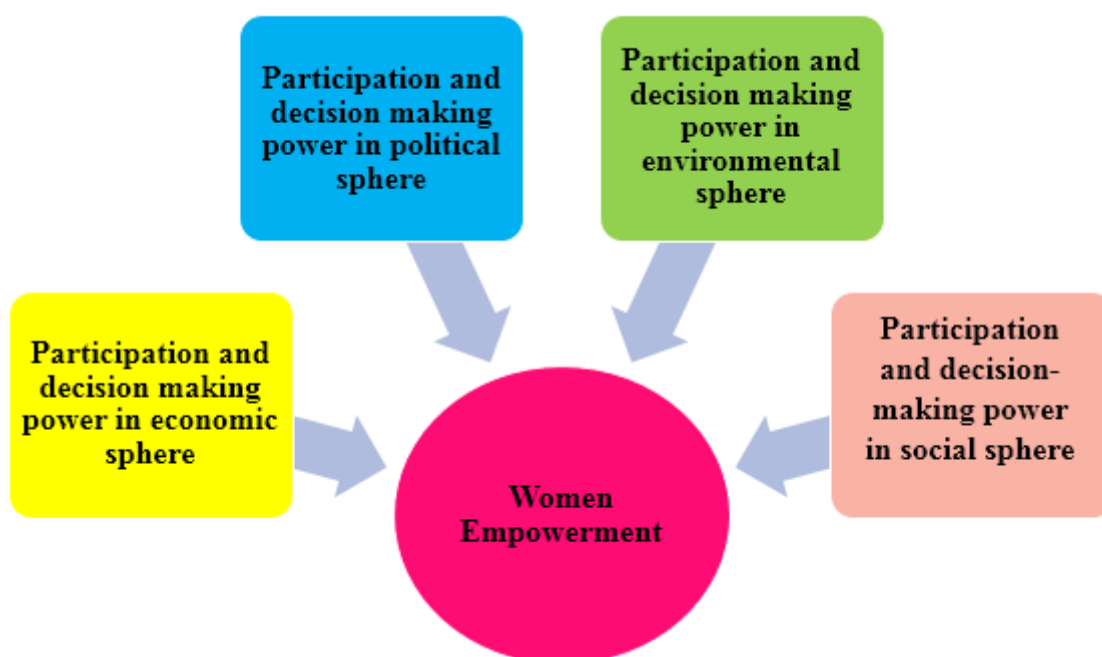


Fig.2.: Conceptual Framework for women empowerment

India has a long history of empowering women. Abhorrent practices like sati and child marriage etc. plagued Indian society and social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Acharya Vinobha Bhave, Swami Vivekananda, and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, etc. diligently battled for the emancipation of women in the past. One of India's earliest political organizations, the Indian National Congress, spoke out in 1917 in favour of women's political equality. Specific laws like Equal Pay Act of 1976, the Maternity Benefit Act of 1961, and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (prevention and protection act) of 2013, etc. were put in place to safeguard women rights and eventually empower them in India. The national policy for women's empowerment was also introduced by the Indian government in 2001, with the goal of eradicating all forms of gender discrimination. Among its specific goals was the development of legal frameworks. To protect women's rights and legal entitlements, the National Commission for Women (NCW) and the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) have been very instrumental. Women now enjoy special rights under the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution, which were passed in 1993 which includes seat



reservations (33% of total seats) in legislatures. The Indian government has ratified a number of international agreements and human rights documents that guarantee women's equal rights. They include CEDAW (1993), the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, the Nairobi Forward Thinking Strategy (1985), and the Mexico Plan of Action (1975), etc.

Further, for the holistic development of women the Indian government over the past three decades have initiated many schemes like Information and Mass Education, the Food and Nutrition Board, and the National Credit Fund for Women (1993). India, the largest democracy in the world, has a sizable female population i.e., 48.4% of the total population. A large chunk of that female population resides in rural areas. So, empowering women can contribute to the nation's holistic growth.

Gender Equality the Indian Scenario:

According to UNICEF, “every child deserves to reach her or his full potential, but gender inequalities in their lives and in the lives of those who care for them hinder this reality.” UNICEF defines gender equality as “women and men, girls and boys, should enjoy the same rights and liberties, resources, opportunities, and protections. It is, however, not important that girls and boys, or women and men, be the same, or that they be treated exactly alike.” If one can grasp the phrases used in relation to gender equality in India, he / she can understand it better. In the Indian context, to treat both men and women equally is a phenomenon known as gender equity. Gender equality can be achieved only when everybody has equal access to resources, opportunities, rewards, and necessities. Studies suggest that in the presence of gender inequality women are often left out of decision-making process and faces more hurdles while accessing resources compared to men.

India receives a score of 1 for both primary education and tertiary enrollment in the most recent Global Gender Gap Report Index (2022) from the World Economic Forum, which is part of the vertical category "Educational Attainment." This suggests that enrollment in basic and tertiary education is becoming more gender balanced. However, there are persistent gender disparities in enrollment across the spectrum of higher education. The government initiatives at the federal and state levels, including the mid-day meal programme, the Right to Education Act, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan, and the most recent one the Beti Bacho, Beti Padhao, and along with numerous scholarship programmes for girls, etc. have received the much needed public's attention. According to Office of Registrar General of India data (1999- 2019) India's sex ratio has improved from 898 females per 1000 males in 1999 to 907 females per 1000 males in 2019, from having a severely skewed sex ratio at birth because of the societal and cultural devaluation of females and the phenomena of "son preference." The transformation that has occurred in the society where female foeticide, infanticide, and neglect are rampant, even though gender equality is still far from being achieved and sex-selective abortion is still practiced. According to the most recent figures from the Office of the Registrar General of India's report, the life expectancy of women at birth increased by 22.9 years, from 47.8 years in 1971 to 70.7 years in 2014–18. While Indian women's average life expectancy is about 2.7 years longer than men's, the female advantage in life expectancy at birth around the world makes it impossible to say that Indian women are still living up to their biological potential suggesting towards the existing gender bias in health sector too.



In the Gender Inequality Index (GII) for 2021 (0.490) compared to 2020, India likewise made a slight improvement (0.493). The GII gauges accomplishment disparity between men and women in three areas: labour market access, empowerment, and reproductive health. Even when compared to its close neighbours, the country's progress in reducing gender disparity has not been particularly noteworthy. Just 42.3% and 31.7% of females, respectively, indicated in the National Family Health Survey that they jointly or alone own a home and a piece of land. Most of the women who responded to the survey did not have any autonomy in choosing their life partner, despite the fact that 51.2% of them agreed to have it in financial concerns. This shouldn't come as a surprise because caste, religion, and class continue to play a large role in most weddings. One of the lowest rates in the world and far lower than the global average of 47% was the female labour force participation rate in India in 2021 at 23%. The already disastrous graph has taken another damage from the COVID-19 problem. Women's labour is disproportionately undercounted in the economy, masking their true participation. Also, according to news reports 32% of women experience intimate partner abuse, which has reportedly increased as a result of COVID-19-led lockdowns that have created a shadow epidemic, despite efforts to combat gender-based violence against women in India.

In India most women lack financial and personal autonomy, notwithstanding improvements in education and basic health indices. The former is aggressively marketed, but it's important to keep in mind that these are also elements that improve women's odds for finding husbands. Women's socioeconomic autonomy is discouraged and viewed with mistrust in the private sphere, where conventional gender norms are practised and encouraged. Further, political representation of women in India remains appallingly low at less than 15% despite considerable increases in the 2019 federal elections. Due to a lack of political will, the Women's Reservation Law, which sought to reserve 33% of seats for women at the Union and state level, has been reduced to a mere vote bank policy while the number of women in politics has shown growth in the grassroot levels. Similarly, closing the gender gap in digital technology requires more work as studies show that only 54% of women in India have access to mobile phones and compared to other developing countries women's access to internet is significantly lower. Hence, we can state that in order to empower women and eradicate gender inequity women must be valued as ends in themselves rather than just as a means to an end.

Role of Women in Economic, Social, and Environmental Development in India:

a. Economic Sphere:

In India women professionals have worked diligently over the past few decades and substantially contribute to the prosperity and economic growth of the country. According to a recent report of Confederation of Indian Industry currently, 343 million of India's 432 million working-age women work in the unorganized sector. Moreover, as per recent studies, women in India contributes around 18% to GDP. However, due to persisting social hurdles associated with gender inequality, violence, illiteracy, poverty, and health, etc. the full potential of women workforce remains untapped. According to a McKinsey Global Institute analysis, if women are given equal opportunities India could boost its GDP by 770 billion US dollars by 2025. In terms of startups and unicorns, India currently has the third-largest ecosystem in the world. However, just 10% of them have female founders at the helm. Further, the challenges brought on by the



pandemic, India's gender gap increased by 4.3%. This was caused by declining economic possibilities for Indian women, which decreased their involvement in the formal labour force. The informal work market is likewise experiencing the tremors of the pandemic crisis. Even in rural India, in spite of societal and familial marginalization, women have fought for their rights, started their own business and inspired several others. For Government initiated programmes like the "Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act", in rural areas women workforce has got access to supervisory positions which has led to improve in their quality of life and adding to economic development of the communities at large.

b. Social Sphere:

Women make about half of human capital, the second-largest pool of potential human resources behind men, according to the UN Secretary General. According to Giuliano (2014), women are the foundation of a family's quality and sustainable growth, which creates a wholesome society. As the leader, the director, the manager of the family's finances, and finally, the mother, they take on several duties. According to Mojumder (2020), a woman is not just a companion to her spouse but also a helper. She forgoes her own pleasures and desires to uphold moral standards, reduce her husband's stress so that he can better concentrate on family's economic growth, and maintain harmony in the home. She also motivates others to put forth considerable effort and create positive changes in their life. Further Mojumder (2020), added that a disciplined, well-organized family is crucial for the success of the average family. The woman in the family plays the role of CEO. Apart from taking care of cooking, serving meals, washing, and housekeeping as an administrator, she plans a lot of social events to enhance social status inside the family and oversees recreation by planning a variety of leisure activities meeting the interests of both young and old family members.

Existing literature suggests that a mother is entirely responsible for giving birth and for the majority of child rearing. A child's behaviour pattern is mostly influenced by his/her interactions with the mother. A mother is the first teacher to a child because an infant picks up on racial norms, masculine behaviour, moral principles, and values, etc. from the mother. Thanks to her intimate and extended involvement with the infant, a mother can identify and foster the early child's distinctive traits and actions, which are subsequently essential in creating its personality.

The woman serves as the focal point of the household and each member look to her for understanding, wisdom, and recognition. When it comes to the welfare of her family, a woman invests more time, effort, and thought compared to her peers. Moreover, a woman contributes to the income of the family by either earning herself or traditionally by managing the expenses of the household. Hence, we can say that in the family, the woman performs the roles of wife, partner, organiser, director, re-creator, distributor, manager, and disciplinarian. For the growth of any country, its social construct must be very strong, and women play a very critical role in developing that social construct. Apart from directly contributing to GDP, participating in social reform movements, etc., women's contribution towards nation building also accounts for her active role in shaping the nation's future.



c. Political Sphere:

When we examine woman's contribution to the social development of a country, we have to review their role in the political sphere as well. Political participation is a social activity and goes beyond political systems and cultural boundaries (Dubey and Singh 2022). In one hand gender has always had an impact on political participation and continues to do so today in India. On the other hand, throughout history it is noted that Indian women have influenced the development of the nation. The role of women in the Indian independence movement was instrumental in the struggle against British rule at the turn of the twentieth century. Despite the Declaration of Independence's explicit declaration of women's rights, women have historically had less influence in politics. After India gained its independence, women's wings were founded in political parties, marking a significant change in the then existing political climate. A nationwide movement for equal rights that had been promoted by the British colonial authorities in India gave rise to the women's right to vote campaign at the beginning of the 20th century. Literature suggests that in India, 65% of women and 67% of males cast ballots in the general elections of 2019.

In 16 of India's 29 states, there are more women than men registered to vote. In India's parliamentary elections in April and May 2021, more than 260.6 million women cast ballots. As in India's the political party system is becoming more and more competitive, a growing number of parties are successful in winning over female voters, which has assisted them in growing. In many of the major political parties in the nation, women's wing organisations have been formed. Women's political groups include the All-India Mahila Congress of the INC, the BJP Mahila Morcha, and the CPI's National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW), etc.

According to Martha Nussbaum women refrain from participating in politics due to the threat of violence. Due to issues like early marriage, domestic violence, poor literacy rates, etc. women's possibilities for economic advancement are negatively impacted in India. Even though gender and caste-based discrimination is abolished by the Indian Constitution but women's exclusion from political life still prevails in India. A 2012 online survey of women in India found the following major factors for their less impressive political participation - demanding family commitments, image of women political leaders, and illiteracy. Further, studies have found that the knowledge offered by male family members or community members serves as the foundation for a woman's decision-making process. Women lack the experience needed for leadership roles because of their household responsibilities. Women need to be properly educated for them to understand the political system and issues. News reports and articles suggest due to wide spread illiteracy women's political rights are often abused as their names are removed from voter registration lists. According to studies by Niraja Jayal and Nirmala Buch women's literacy is related to their ability to interact with others, move outside the home and take stand on their own. They also found that women who lack education are persistently humiliated and devalued in the panchayats.

d. Environmental Sphere:

According to Natalie and Williams (2016), the necessity of evaluation with respect to gender mainstreaming in all initiatives was reaffirmed at the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002. However, a country's natural resources and environment are



constantly being strained by a growing population and technological advancement. Moreover, to show how environmental degradation can add to the existing gender gap coupled with worldwide persisting issues of women's rights, researchers have been working hard to link gender equality with a balanced environment. For example, countries with more legislative women representation are likely to consider and deliberate upon environmental issues (Payal and Gunwan 2020). To create a sustainable environment the relationship between women and the environment must be explored. Women in India are often believed to be attached to the outdoors, whether it is for personal reasons or out of a motherly love. Women are closely connected to their local environment through their work as farmers, water and firewood collectors, and firewood sellers etc. (Borah 2020).

Existing study suggests that in the Indian subcontinent, the natural resources are fast depleting with the increase in population and subsequent raise in fundamental needs which is adding to the existing conflict between our rights to resources and depleting natural resources. According to K J Warren (1994), women and the environment are closely linked, and this close connection has sparked the development of the theory of eco-feminist, a branch of feminism that bridges ecological ethics and aims to understand the conceptual links between sexist oppression and environmental degradation. From Chipko Movement, Social and Community Forestry Programs, to Individual conservation programs, in the Indian context women have been involved in conservation programs.

As compared to men, women in rural areas have stronger ties to conservation and natural resources. They come into everyday interaction with the environment, including the land, water, forest, and wildlife, because of their traditional gender roles (Pallavi 2002). Women's contributions are considered as resulting in better rule compliance and increased openness in all fields of endeavour. Even dispute resolution and observance are better because of it (Singh 2015).

2. CONCLUSION

Over the past decades the topic of women empowerment has witnessed debate across the globe. For India, being one of the fastest growing economies and highly populated country, the stakes are quite high in terms of accomplishing the SDGs by 2030. For India one of the major hindrances in its way is gender inequality. Studies suggest that no matter where they reside, in India every child has to face gender discrimination from an early age. Be it at their homes or community – in textbooks, animated movies, mainstream movies or television contents, or among the care provider, every girl and boy has faced discrimination. We may have come far, and the country has addressed issues related to gender inequality, still the existing literature reveals some serious gaps. The study has found that women in India lack autonomy in both financial and personal spheres. Women's education and basic health indices though showing significant progress over the past decade, policy makers must consider that education and health indices alone cannot empower women. Socio-economic and political autonomy are also crucial for women to realize their full potential. Being a nurturer by nature women can shape young minds, take household decisions and inspire the surroundings when in come to social



norms, moral and best practices. Women participation in politics is must for any society to thrive. Also, with the increase in development projects across the country the natural resources are exploited at a voracious rate than ever and hence the scope and intensity of ecology movements in independent India had steadily widened. And traditionally women are more connected to the nature and in the Indian context they have played a significant role with respect to conservation of the environment. Hence, women must be further encouraged to participate and lead at grassroot as well as policy making levels.

In the pursuit of achieving the SDGs by 2030 the international framework has directed each participating nation to focus on women empower. The UN has encouraged the participating nations to end any form of discrimination against women and empower women in every sphere of life (SDG 5). Hence, for India and its policy makers its high time to minimize the existing gaps and along with existing policies, extra attention must be focused on women and women related issues. From offering women adequate access and correct information regarding their education, health, public policies, schemes, etc. and encouraging them to participate in political, economic and environmental spheres, both government and private stakeholders have a prominent role to play. Focus must be concentrated on the use of both traditional and digital media to transform women's lives across all strata of society. To meet the UN mandate of SDGs, India must plan and execute a robust and inclusive strategy to bring social, economic, political and environmental autonomy and encourage participation of its women force.

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