

Closing gender gap key to SDG goals

Targeted reforms and data-driven strategies to empower women are essential for equitable national growth



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Despite numerous policy efforts aimed at achieving gender equality, India still lags both developed and emerging nations when it comes to women's status. Indian women continue to face inequalities across social, political, and economic spheres.

The Indian government has launched several programmes, such as Mahila Shakti Kendra, Stand-Up India, and Skill India, to encourage women's participation in the workforce. These initiatives aim to increase their employment rates, expand access to credit, and enhance their financial decision-making. However, safety concerns, patriarchal norms, and implementation gaps continue to hinder progress. The NITI Aayog's SDG Index 2023-24 rankings show that India's poor performance on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 — Gender Equality — remains a major obstacle. Thirteen States and one union Territory perform worse than the already low national average for SDG 5, which is only 49 out of 100.

India's Standing

India is ranked 131st out of 148 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2025 released by the World Economic Forum, with a Gender Parity score of 64.1 per cent. This low ranking highlights significant challenges in achieving gender equality across key dimensions such as economic participation, educational attainment, health, and political empowerment.

There is some improvement as per the UNDP's Gender Inequality Index.

India moved from rank 122 in 2021 to 108 in 2023 (Human Development Report 2025). In India, gender disparity affects societal norms, healthcare, education, and income. SDG 5 seeks to eradicate discriminatory laws, support women in leadership roles, stop harmful customs like child marriage, prevent gender-based violence, and recognise unpaid caregiving.

Gender inequality has profound repercussions, including inhibiting women's financial autonomy, access to education and healthcare, control over land and property, and their overall participation in development.

Evidence strongly suggests that gender equality has a significant progressive impact on economic growth. When women's incomes rise, it boosts both household well-being and national productivity. Countries like Iceland, Norway, and New Zealand have significantly closed gender gaps through institutional reforms, supportive social infrastructure, and strong political will.

Although microfinance institutions are designed to empower women through self-employment, their potential is often undermined by weak financial infrastructure, delays in disbursing loans, and operational inefficiencies.



Status of Women

There have been some positive developments. The Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) declined from 130 deaths per 100,000 live births (2014-16) to 97 in the 2018-20 period (Press Information Bureau, 2025). The sex ratio is also projected to improve, rising from 943 females per 1,000 males (2011 Census) to 952 by 2036.

However, serious disparities remain. In the academic year 2023-24, dropout rates among girls exceeded those of boys at both middle and secondary school levels. The female labour force participation rate is just 32 per cent, compared to 77.1 per cent for men. In high-skilled occupations, women earn 30-35 per cent less than men.

Although 75 per cent of rural female workers are employed in agriculture,

By standardising rights related to marriage, divorce, and inheritance regardless of religion, the UCC lays a stronger legal foundation for gender equality

only 14 per cent own land, and they control just 11 per cent of agricultural land holdings. Women occupy a mere 12.7 per cent of senior management positions. Their representation in the Lok Sabha has also seen a slight decline — from 14.36 per cent in 2019 to 13.62 per cent in 2024.

Reported crimes against women have increased significantly. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), total reported cases rose from 3,71,503 in 2020 to 4,45,256 in 2022. Crimes such as rape-related murders, acid attacks, abductions, human trafficking, and offences under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act also witnessed a rise. However, dowry-related deaths showed a marginal decline.

The Road Ahead

Despite the expansion of self-help groups (SHGs), their effectiveness is often hampered due to poor financial literacy, weak managerial skills, and restricted access to credit and markets. To address the root causes of gender inequality and enhance India's performance on SDG 5, a holistic and multi-pronged strategy is essential.

Key reforms must focus on:

- Bridging the gender pay gap through the enforcement of pay parity laws and conducting regular gender audits.
- Promoting women's leadership by implementing reservation policies and investing in capacity-building initiatives.
- Enabling inclusive labour policies that promote maternity support and workplace safety.
- Expanding access to credit, training, and markets.
- Prioritising services for marginalised and underprivileged girls
- Rigorously implementing gender-sensitive laws and enhancing child protection measures.

The introduction of the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) in Goa and Uttarakhand is a landmark step towards the legal empowerment of women. By standardising rights related to marriage, divorce, and inheritance regardless of religion, the UCC strengthens the legal foundation for gender equality.

Achieving gender equality is not just a matter of justice — it is a critical prerequisite for sustainable and inclusive development. India must adopt well-funded, targeted, and data-driven strategies to unlock the full potential of its women and ensure that national growth benefits all citizens equally.

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