



India's Road to Gender Parity

This editorial is based on “[Unfinished business of gender parity in India](#)” which was published in Hindustan Times on 19/06/2025. The article brings into focus the ongoing challenges of gender parity in India. The World Economic Forum's 2025 report ranks India 131st out of 148 countries, underscoring the need for more concerted efforts.

For Prelims: [World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2025](#), [Women empowerment](#), [Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana](#), [Mahila E-Haat](#), [Maternity Benefit \(Amendment\) Act 2017](#), [Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana](#), [Operation Sindoor](#), [Self-help groups](#), [Women's Reservation Act of 2023](#), [World Bank's Global Findex Survey 2021](#).

For Mains: Key Strides of India in Achieving Gender Parity, Key Issues Hindering Gender Parity in India.

India's pursuit of [gender parity](#) has made progress, but the road ahead remains steep. Women's education levels are improving, yet **political representation remains stagnant at a mere 14% in Parliament**. The economic disparity is stark, with **women contributing under 20% to GDP, earning far less than men**. The [World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2025](#) paints a dismal picture, ranking India **131st out of 148 countries**, lagging behind its BRICS counterparts and South Asian neighbours. To achieve true gender equality, India must focus more on **tangible, inclusive progress across all sectors**.

What are the Key Strides of India in Achieving Gender Parity?

- **Progress in Women's Education:** India has made remarkable strides in achieving gender parity in education.
 - Female gross enrolment ratio at the elementary level is **94.32%, slightly higher than 89.28% for boys**. Similarly, at the secondary level, girls have an enrolment ratio of **81.32%, compared to 78% for boys**.
 - The literacy rate of women in India has increased by 68%- up from 9% at the time of Independence to **77% at present** signals a strong commitment to closing the gender education gap.
- **Economic Empowerment through Financial Inclusion:** Initiatives like the [Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana \(PMJDY\)](#) have been pivotal in increasing women's financial inclusion.
 - As of January 2025, **56% of PMJDY accounts are held by women**, granting them better access to banking, savings, and credit.
 - This **financial independence has provided women, particularly in rural areas**, with the ability to make critical financial decisions and engage in entrepreneurial ventures.
 - The [Direct Benefit Transfer \(DBT\)](#) system has also empowered women by ensuring that government subsidies (like **Ladli Behna Yojana in MP**) and welfare funds directly reach them, bypassing intermediaries.

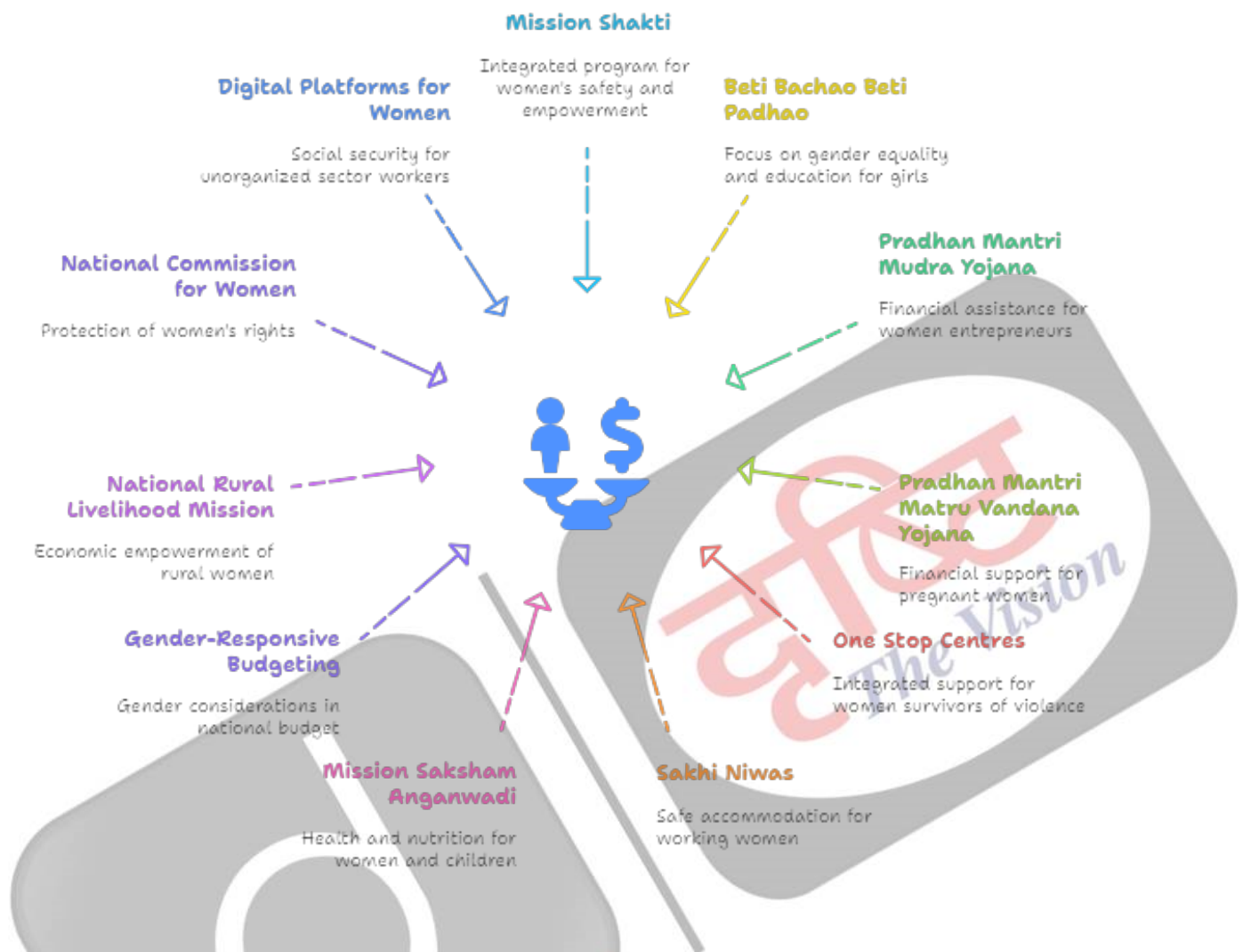
- **Legal Reforms for Women's Rights and Safety:** India has introduced several crucial legal reforms aimed at enhancing women's safety and empowerment.
 - The [Criminal Law \(Amendment\) Act, 2013](#), strengthened punishments for sexual assault and harassment, reflecting a **zero-tolerance approach to violence against women**.
 - Moreover, the **introduction of 26 weeks of paid maternity leave in 2017** was a significant stride, promoting better work-life balance for women and enabling them to stay in the workforce without fear of losing their jobs.
 - These legal steps reflect a deeper commitment to ensuring women's safety and participation in public life.
- **Rising Women in Leadership Roles:** Women in India are breaking barriers in leadership across sectors, with figures like **Charu Sinha, the first woman to head four sectors of the CRPF**, and **Justice Nagarathna**, to become India's first female Chief Justice of India.
 - **Colonel Sofiya Qureshi** co-led the briefing on [Operation Sindoor](#) alongside **Wing Commander Vyomika Singh**, marking another significant milestone for women in the military.
 - Also, in the corporate world, nearly 97% of NSE-listed companies have appointed at least one woman director by March 2025.
- **Political Empowerment through Reservations:** India has seen increased female participation in politics, particularly at the grassroots level.
 - The [73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments](#) reserved one-third of seats for women in Panchayats and local governance bodies, leading to more than 40% of local governance positions being held by women.
 - The [Women's Reservation Act of 2023](#), which reserves one-third of the seats in Parliament and state assemblies, is a significant stride toward enhancing women's representation in national politics.
- **Health and Wellness Improvements:** India has made considerable strides in improving women's health outcomes, particularly maternal health.
 - The [National Health Mission](#) and programs like **Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram (JSSK)** have helped reduce maternal mortality rates by over 50% in the last decade.
 - The **Ayushman Bharat Scheme** has expanded healthcare access, with millions of women benefiting from free health checkups and treatments.
 - Women account for **nearly 49% of beneficiaries of health insurance scheme AB-PMJAY**, ensuring better healthcare access, particularly in rural areas.
- **Increased Female Workforce Participation in Rural India:** India's flagship employment program, [MGNREGA](#), has played a significant role in boosting female participation in the labor force, particularly in rural areas.
 - Over **57.47% of MGNREGA workers** are women (as of 2022-23) benefiting from the program's equal wage provisions.
 - These wages provide women with independent income, increasing their autonomy.
 - The program's impact is also visible in states like **Rajasthan**, where rural women have seen significant economic empowerment.
- **Promotion of Women's Entrepreneurship:** Government-backed schemes like [Stand Up India](#) and [MUDRA \(Micro Units Development and Refinance Agency\)](#) have been instrumental in encouraging women's entrepreneurship.
 - In 2021, **68% of loans** under the Stand Up India scheme went to women, reflecting a rising trend of women engaging in business.
 - Moreover, [Self-Help Groups \(SHGs\)](#) have been pivotal in providing rural women with access to savings, credit, and financial literacy.
 - **SHGs serve as both a financial and social network**, supporting women in starting and growing their businesses while promoting financial independence **blending well with the Lakhpati Didi Scheme**.

What are the Key Issues Hindering Gender Parity in India?

- **Political Underrepresentation:** India's political landscape continues to marginalize women, **with only 13.8% female representation in Parliament, a decline from 14.7% in 2023**.

- Despite the passing of the **Women's Reservation Act in 2023**, political will and structural barriers delay its **full implementation until 2029**.
- This stagnation undermines efforts to achieve meaningful female participation in governance.
 - For instance, **only 5.6% of ministerial roles are held by women**, highlighting the underrepresentation at decision-making levels.
- **Low Female Labor Force Participation:** Despite recent progress, [women's labor force participation](#) in India still remains low at around **41.7%**.
 - Despite a **rise in female employment over the years, societal norms, lack of child care, and wage gaps** push women to the informal sector, where social security and protections are minimal.
 - Also, research by Oxfam India in 2020 estimated the **economic value of unpaid work** performed by women in India at around **₹19 lakh crore**.
 - A McKinsey report estimates that closing the gender employment gap could add **\$770 billion to India's GDP by 2025**, yet progress is sluggish.
- **Cultural Barriers and Patriarchal Norms:** Deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes severely restrict women's freedom in education, employment, and social mobility.
 - These cultural barriers limit women's choices in key areas like career progression and leadership roles (**glass ceiling and glass cliff**), especially in rural India.
 - A recent survey about Financial Awareness Among Women reveals that **59% do not independently take decisions on their finances**, further curtailing their independence.
 - This systemic bias has made India one of the lowest-ranked in South Asia in gender equality, according to the 2025 Global Gender Gap Index, **with only 64.1% gender parity**.
- **Gender Pay Gap:** The gender pay gap in India remains significant. Even when women do enter the workforce, their earnings are consistently lower than their male counterparts in similar roles, particularly in high-skilled sectors.
 - For instance, the gender pay gap in urban India is reflected in data showing that **women earn 30-40% less than men for comparable roles**.
 - This disparity extends to informal sectors, where women often earn less than their male counterparts for the same work, such as in agriculture and domestic work.
- **Educational Attainment vs. Employment Opportunities:** While women's educational attainment has improved significantly, the leap from education to economic participation is obstructed by **a lack of relevant job opportunities**.
 - For instance, **despite the high proportion of female STEM graduates**, women account for less than a third of the STEM workforce in India at **27% (ORF)**.
 - This paradox reveals how the education system, despite its successes, has failed to translate into meaningful employment opportunities, largely due to cultural and infrastructural gaps.
- **Inadequate Maternity Benefits and Childcare Support:** Although India has made strides in offering 26 weeks of paid maternity leave, the lack of adequate childcare infrastructure remains a key barrier for women's workforce participation.
 - The **absence of affordable, accessible childcare services in both urban and rural areas** forces many women to either leave the workforce or accept lower-paying, part-time jobs.
 - For example, **73% of Indian women leave their jobs after giving birth** (The Better India) while balancing full-time employment.
 - This significantly lowers their potential for career growth and economic independence, further entrenching gender inequality.
- **Limited Usage to Financial Services:** Although initiatives like the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana have increased female account ownership, the usage of these accounts remains limited, with **32% of women's accounts being inactive** ([World Bank's Global Findex Survey 2021](#)).
- Financial inclusion is crucial for economic empowerment, as women tend to save more and reinvest in family well-being.

Initiatives for Gender Parity in India



What Measures can India Adopt to Accelerate Progress Towards Gender Parity?

- **Implement Comprehensive Skill Development Programs for Women:** To ensure women's active participation in the formal economy, India should implement widespread skill development programs focused on sectors with high-growth potential such as **technology, renewable energy, and digital services**.
 - These programs should emphasize practical skills, entrepreneurial training, and digital literacy, **empowering women to secure higher-paying, skilled jobs**.
 - A strong focus on upskilling rural women, in particular, can bridge the **urban-rural divide and help integrate women into emerging job markets**. Special emphasis should be placed on **non-traditional sectors to break occupational segregation**.
- **Enhance and Enforce Gender-Sensitive Labor Laws:** India must strengthen the enforcement of labor laws that promote gender equality, particularly those addressing **equal pay, workplace harassment, and paid family leave**.
 - There should be a national framework ensuring all workplaces comply with policies on flexible working hours and child care support, promoting an inclusive environment for women's advancement.

- **Regular audits of companies** to assess their compliance with gender equality norms and the adoption of punitive measures for non-compliance would encourage better practices.
 - This would create a **systemic change in the workplace**, ensuring women's long-term participation in the formal economy.
- **Strengthen Political Empowerment through Local Leadership Initiatives:** Expanding on the success of reservations in local governance, India can create targeted programs to mentor and train women for higher political leadership roles.
 - This could include **capacity-building initiatives for women politicians at the Panchayat, municipal, and state levels**, equipping them with public administration, governance, and leadership skills.
 - In this context, **web series like Panchayat** have played a crucial role in raising awareness and highlighting important issues.
 - By fostering a **generation of women leaders with practical experience**, India can gradually increase female representation in higher political offices, enhancing **their influence in policymaking at national and state levels**.
- **Promote Gender-Responsive Budgeting and Policy Making:** India should institutionalize **gender-responsive budgeting (initiated in 2005) across all levels of government**, ensuring that **gender considerations are integrated into every policy, program, and budget allocation**.
 - This would involve conducting gender impact assessments before rolling out any major policy or welfare initiative, ensuring that women's needs are prioritized.
 - Financial resources should be allocated specifically for schemes that empower **women in areas such as education, health, and employment**, ensuring a more equitable distribution of public funds.
 - This approach ensures that gender equality becomes a core focus of all national and state-level policymaking.
- **Increase Support for Women Entrepreneurs through Tailored Financial Services:** To encourage women's entrepreneurship, India needs to create a specialized financial ecosystem that offers women **easy access to capital, micro-loans, and venture funding**.
 - Banks and financial institutions should be incentivized to lower interest rates and **relax collateral requirements for women entrepreneurs**, making it easier for them to establish and grow their businesses.
 - A national database of women entrepreneurs should be created to track and offer tailored support services, such as mentorship, networking opportunities, and targeted business development programs.
- **Reform the Educational Curriculum to Challenge Gender Norms:** To change societal attitudes and challenge gender stereotypes, India should **integrate gender equality into the school and higher education curriculum**.
 - This would involve not only promoting the achievements of women but also **educating both boys and girls on concepts like gender equality, respect, and shared responsibility**.
 - A focus on challenging traditional gender roles in subject choices (**such as encouraging girls to pursue STEM and boys to explore caregiving professions**) will help break down deep-rooted societal barriers.
 - This educational shift will shape a new generation that is more open to gender parity in all spheres of life.
- **Implement Robust Data Collection and Gender Disaggregation:** India must ensure that gender-disaggregated data is systematically collected across all sectors and used to drive evidence-based policymaking.
 - This would include **tracking gender gaps in areas like employment, healthcare, and education** to measure progress and identify areas needing intervention.
 - Creating a **national registry for women's economic participation and leadership roles** would help policymakers allocate resources and interventions effectively.
 - A data-driven approach would enable India to monitor progress in real-time and make necessary adjustments to policies and strategies.
- **Strengthen Support Systems for Domestic Workers and Informal Laborers:** Since a large proportion of women work in the informal economy, India must develop stronger **legal protections and social safety nets for domestic workers** and informal laborers.
 - This includes establishing **labor unions, providing access to healthcare, and**

enforcing fair wages and working conditions.

- The **implementation of minimum wage laws for domestic workers** and the provision of childcare facilities can make this sector more sustainable and beneficial for women, **lifting them out of economic dependence and into more secure working conditions.**

- **Introduce Gender Impact Bonds for Women-Centric Initiatives:** To scale up investments in women-centric projects, India can introduce Gender Impact Bonds (GIBs) that attract private capital for social impact initiatives aimed at closing gender gaps.
 - These bonds would fund initiatives such as women's education in underserved areas, entrepreneurial ecosystems for women, and women's health services.
 - **Investors would earn returns tied to the success of gender-specific outcomes,** such as increased female literacy rates or improved female workforce participation, creating a sustainable funding mechanism for gender equality.

Conclusion:

"Gender equality is not a women's issue, it's a human issue. It affects us all." India has made **commendable strides toward gender parity, but the journey is far from complete.** As the nation continues to close gaps in education, economic participation, and leadership, a concerted focus on breaking cultural barriers, ensuring equal opportunities, and implementing inclusive policies is essential. True gender equality will only be achieved when **both men and women are given the same platforms to succeed.**

Drishti Mains Question:

India has made significant progress in achieving gender parity in various sectors, yet substantial challenges remain in realizing true equality. Examine the key strides made by India towards gender equality, the obstacles still hindering progress

UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q. Which of the following gives 'Global Gender Gap Index' ranking to the countries of the world? (2017)

- (a) World Economic Forum
- (b) UN Human Rights Council
- (c) UN Women
- (d) World Health Organization

Ans: (a)

Q. Two of the schemes launched by the Government of India for Women's development are Swadhar and Swayam Siddha. As regards the difference between them, consider the following statements: (2010)

1. Swayam Siddha is meant for those in difficult circumstances such as women survivors of natural disasters or terrorism, women prisoners released from jails, mentally challenged women etc., whereas Swadhar is meant for holistic empowerment of women through Self Help Groups.
2. Swayam Siddha is implemented through Local Self Government bodies or reputed Voluntary Organizations whereas Swadhar is implemented through the ICDS units set up in the states.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Ans: (d)

Mains

Q.1 “Empowering women is the key to control population growth”. Discuss. (2019)

Q.2 Discuss the positive and negative effects of globalization on women in India? (2015)

Q.3 Male membership needs to be encouraged in order to make women’s organization free from gender bias. Comment. (2013)

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