



Gender Equity as the Blueprint for a Stronger India

The editorial is based on “[A Supreme Court ruling with no room for gender justice](#)” article published in The Hindu on 12/08/2025, focusing on the persistent challenges to gender equality in India. It highlights the gaps in legal protections, social norms, and institutional biases that continue to hinder women's full participation in society.

For Prelims: [Female labor force participation](#), [STEM](#), [Stand-Up India](#), [Common Service Centres](#), [Operation Sindoor](#), [Self-help groups](#), [Women's Reservation Act of 2023](#)

For Mains: Gender Equality in India: Related Challenges & Way forward

India has made substantial strides in women's empowerment, reflected in improved educational attainment, workforce participation, and targeted skill-building initiatives. Yet, achieving comprehensive [gender equality](#) remains a pressing challenge. According to the [World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2025](#), India ranks **131st out of 148** countries, which underscores significant disparities, especially in areas like political representation, economic participation, and access to healthcare, highlighting the need for more comprehensive and **effective policies to address gender inequality**.

How is India Progressing Towards Achieving Gender Equality?

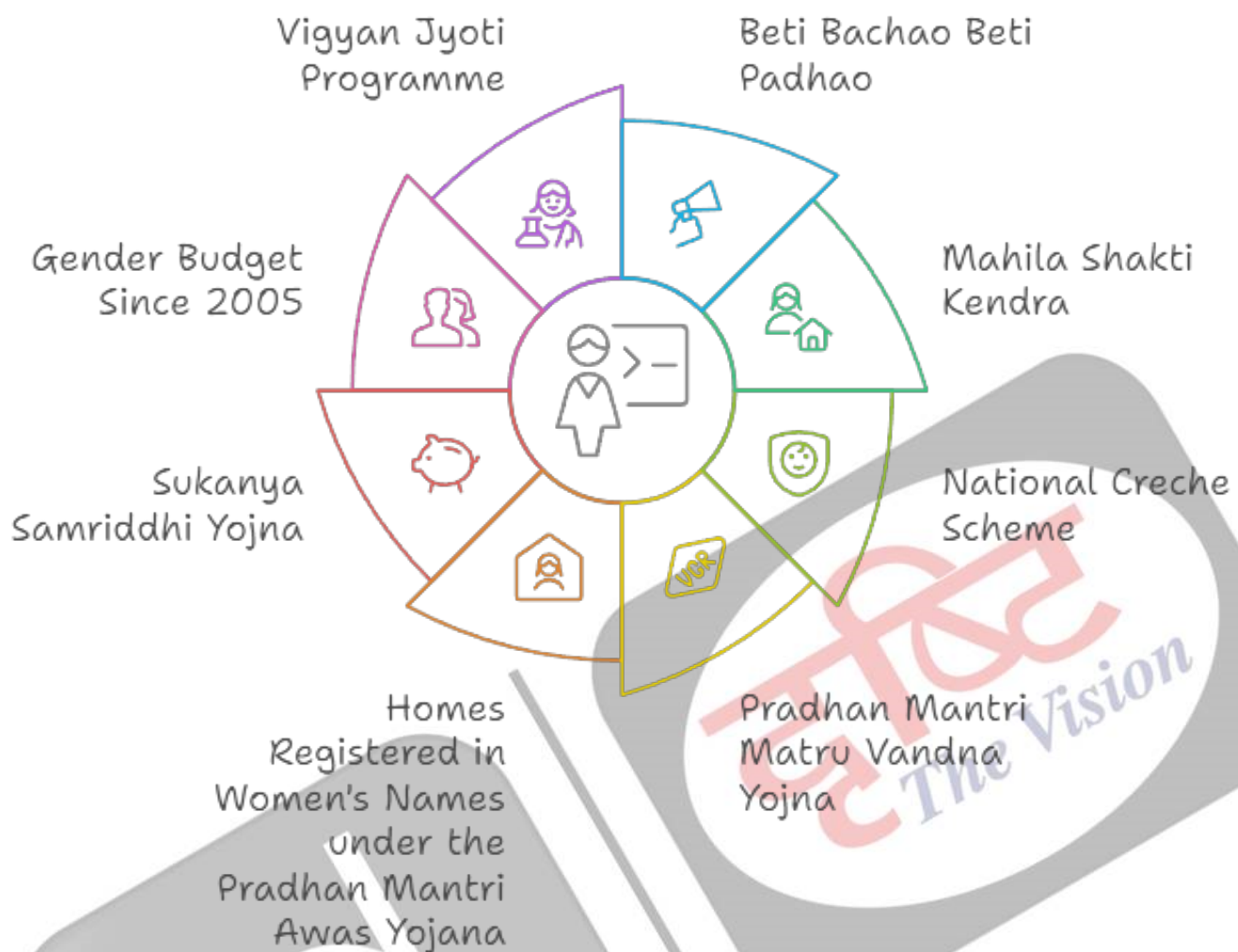
- **Catalyzing Women's Education:** According to the latest [All India Survey on Higher Education \(AISHE\) report](#), female enrolment in higher education rose to **2.07 crore** in 2021-22, making up nearly 50% of total enrolment.
 - As of July 2025, **43% of India's STEM graduates are women**, the highest proportion among major economies globally.
 - The [New Education Policy \(NEP\) 2020](#) has further paved the way for higher retention and opportunities in the fields of STEM.
- **Enhanced Workforce Participation:** According to the [Periodic Labour Force Survey \(PLFS\)](#) 2023-24, India's overall female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) has risen to 41.7%, a meaningful jump after years of stagnation.
 - However, the **increase is sharper for rural women (47.6%)** than in urban areas (25.4%).
 - Women's participation in the [Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme \(MGNREGS\)](#) stood at 57.47% in 2022-23.
- **Rise of Women in Leadership Roles:** Women's representation on boards of companies has increased from **6% in 2013 to 18.3% in 2023**.
 - Industries such as **Education at 30% and Government Administration at 29% have the highest representation of women in leadership roles**, followed by Administrative and Support Services and Hospitals and Health Care, each with 23%.
 - For instance, **Justice Nagarathna will become India's first female [Chief](#)**

[Justice of India](#), marking a historic achievement in the judiciary.

- **Colonel Sofiya Qureshi** co-led the briefing on [Operation Sindoor](#) with Wing Commander **Vyomika Singh**, highlighting significant milestones for women in the military.
- Moreover, India is home to over **7,000 active women-led startups**, accounting for 7.5% of all active startups in the country.
 - **Falguni Nayar's Nykaa, Shradha Sharma's YourStory, and Upasana Taku's MobiKwik** are prominent examples of successful women-led startups in India.
- **Transforming Women's Financial and Digital Access:** Access to formal banking and digital financial tools has significantly empowered women economically.
 - With **financial control, women are more confident to make business and household decisions**. The rise of digital banking, Aadhaar-linked services, and mobile wallets has reduced dependency and improved economic agency.
 - For instance, as per MoSPI (2024), **39.2% of bank accounts** and 39.7% of deposits are now held by women.
 - Also, economic inclusion is now seen as a community effort. **Bank Sakhis model** processed transactions worth USD 40 million (2020)
- **Enhanced Social Consciousness and Cultural Shift:** Over the years, there has been a noticeable change in how women are perceived and represented across various sectors.
 - For instance, [PM Awas Yojana \(PMAY\)](#) allocates homes in women's names, empowering them economically.
 - As of August 2024, **over 89 lakh houses** under PMAY-Urban (PMAY-U) are either **solely or jointly owned by women**.
 - Moreover, Women are excelling in traditionally male-dominated sports, like **boxing (Mary Kom) and badminton (Saina Nehwal)**.
 - Additionally, **women driving for Ola and Uber** reflect changing work norms.
 - Films like **Neerja** and web series like **Panchayat** portray women as resilient and independent, reinforcing these cultural changes.



Empowering Women in India



What are the Key Challenges Hindering Women's Progress Towards Gender Equality in India?

- **Low Female Labour Participation:** As per the **PLFS 2023-24**, the FLFPR stands at **41.7%**, indicating that less than half of the working-age female population is either employed or actively seeking employment.
 - This rate is significantly **lower than the global average of approximately 47%**, highlighting a **substantial gender disparity** in workforce engagement.
 - **Many women leave their jobs after marriage or childbirth**, and returning to employment is challenging due to the **lack of supportive work environments**.
- **Gender Pay Gap and Informal Employment:** The gender pay gap and the rise of informal employment continue to hinder women's economic progress.
 - Despite participating in the workforce, **women are often engaged in low-wage, insecure jobs**, particularly in informal and rural sectors, where social security benefits are limited.
 - **81% of women are employed in the informal sector**.
 - This pay disparity impacts long-term job retention and reduces the motivation for women to enhance their skills.
 - For example, **as per the NSSO, men earn 29.4% more than women in urban areas**, and 51.3% more in rural areas.
- **Gendered Violence and Security Barriers:** Concerns about safety in both public and private

spaces significantly limit women's freedom of movement, access to employment, and educational opportunities.

- **Gender-based violence contributes to both psychological and economic disempowerment.** The situation is exacerbated by delays in justice, inadequate enforcement of laws, and widespread under-reporting of incidents.
 - Despite the introduction of legal reforms aimed at protecting women, enforcement remains inconsistent, and **gender bias in judicial processes continues to hinder progress.**
 - As per the [NCRB](#) data, a total of more than **4 lakh** cases of crimes against women were registered in **2022**, showing a **4.0% increase** over **2021**.
- Also, a 2022 report stated that approximately **30% of the [Nirbhaya Fund](#)**, a corpus established to enhance women's safety and security in India, **remains unutilized.**
- **Unpaid Care Work and Domestic Burden:** Women disproportionately shoulder unpaid domestic work, which remains invisible in official economic metrics.
 - This **dual burden limits time for education, skilling, or formal employment.** Household responsibilities are still seen as a woman's duty, reinforcing gender roles.
 - **Men's participation in domestic duties remains abysmally low**, indicating slow social change.
 - According to the Time Use Survey 2024, **women spend 201 minutes more per day** on unpaid household work compared to men.
 - This discrepancy is attributed to the additional burden of unpaid domestic responsibilities.
- **Women's Underrepresentation in Politics and Leadership:** Although women have made progress at the grassroots level, they continue to be underrepresented in higher decision-making roles.
 - The lack of women in Parliament and on corporate boards hampers the creation of gender-sensitive policies. **While reservations in panchayats have been implemented, this has not led to proportional political power** at the national or state levels.
 - According to the [Election Commission of India \(ECI\)](#), **women constitute 13.6% members** of the Lok Sabha in 2024 as against 14.3% of all members in the 17th Lok Sabha elected in 2019.
 - Although the **Women's Reservation Bill has been passed, progress remains sluggish**, with its implementation anticipated only after 2029.
 - In key leadership roles, **women often face the glass ceiling along with the glass cliff**, where they are more likely to be appointed to leadership positions during times of crisis, making it more difficult to succeed.
- **Digital Gender Gap:** Although [digital literacy](#) is improving, women, especially in rural India, still face limited access to digital tools.
 - Gender disparities in access to mobile phones, internet and digital finance restrict women's ability to fully utilize digital platforms for education, employment, or entrepreneurial opportunities.
 - **India has one of the highest digital gender gaps with 57% of women being aware of mobile internet, but only 37% adopting it**, and just 26% using it regularly, according to the [UNDP](#) (2024).
- **Lack of Supportive Infrastructure and Policies:** The absence of gender-sensitive infrastructure, such as adequate sanitation, childcare facilities, and safe transportation, **discourages women from entering or remaining in the workforce.**
 - Additionally, insufficient maternity benefits, paid leave, and flexible work hours make it **challenging for women to balance their professional and personal responsibilities**, leading many to leave the workforce due to caregiving obligations.
 - Despite progressive laws, **approximately 93.5% of women workers in India cannot access maternity benefits** due to their employment in the informal sector and exemptions for small firms from providing these benefits.
 - Additionally, **73% of Indian women leave their jobs** after giving birth (The Better India) while balancing full-time employment.

What Steps Can India Adopt to Foster Gender Equality?

- **Enhancing Political Representation:** Reservation of seats in legislature should be blended

with targeted programs should focus on capacity-building at the Panchayat, municipal, and state levels, equipping women with **essential skills in public administration, governance, and leadership**.

- By **nurturing a generation of women leaders with hands-on experience**, India can gradually increase female participation in higher political offices, ensuring their stronger influence in **policymaking at both the national and state levels**.
 - Link panchayat incentives to women in leadership roles and **establish gender budgeting programs**.
- The **Bibipur Model, initiated by Sunil Jaglan, is a pioneering community-led initiative in Haryana**, where houses and streets were named after daughters, **promoting their rights and recognition within the community**.
- **Empowering Women Through Skill Development: Skill development programs** for women are crucial for improving their **employability and empowering them economically**.
 - These programs help women acquire relevant skills, improve job opportunities, and reduce dependency.
 - By focusing on areas such as digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and vocational training, these initiatives ensure women are equipped to thrive in various industries.
 - Schemes like [Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana \(PMKVY\)](#) and Skill India focus on training women in diverse sectors, including manufacturing, technology, and services.
 - **Partnerships with private industries can offer industry-specific training** and internship opportunities, ensuring that women gain hands-on experience and are prepared for real-world challenges.
- **Strengthening Gender-Sensitive Practices and Laws:** Gender-sensitive practices and laws are fundamental to creating an equitable environment for women in all aspects of life, including education, employment, and healthcare.
 - Strengthening laws like the [Protection of Women from Sexual Harassment Act, 2013](#), and the [Domestic Violence Act, 2005](#), is crucial to protect women's rights and ensure gender equality.
 - Implementation and enforcement of these laws need to be consistent and rigorous.
 - **Workplaces and educational institutions should focus on gender-sensitive policies** such as **equal pay for equal work and support systems for women balancing work and family life**, such as flexible working hours and childcare facilities.
 - Mandate the inclusion of paternity leave and gender audit disclosures within [Corporate Social Responsibility \(CSR\)](#) and [Environmental, Social, and Governance \(ESG\)](#) frameworks.
 - Encourage **private companies to implement returnship programs** and re-skilling for women returning from career breaks.
- **Encouraging Women Entrepreneurs and Startups:** To foster women entrepreneurship, it is crucial to provide women with the necessary resources, mentorship, and access to capital.
 - Government initiatives like [Startup India](#) and [MUDRA loans](#) have already made significant strides in supporting women-led businesses.
 - Additionally, **creating women-focused business incubators and mentorship networks** can provide guidance, networking opportunities, and **financial backing for women to scale their startups**.
 - By removing barriers to entry and providing ongoing support, we can empower women to lead successful businesses and contribute to economic growth.
- **Revise the Educational Curriculum to Address Gender Norms:** To transform societal perceptions and break gender stereotypes, India should incorporate gender sensitivity into both school and higher education curricula.
 - This **approach would not only highlight the accomplishments of women but also educate both boys and girls** on principles such as gender equality, mutual respect, and shared responsibilities.
 - Emphasizing the need to challenge traditional gender roles encouraging girls to **pursue STEM fields and boys to explore caregiving professions** will help dismantle long-standing societal barriers.
 - Such an **educational shift will foster a generation more receptive** to gender equality in every aspect of life.
- **Digital Empowerment for Women:** Digital empowerment plays a crucial role in enabling women

to access education, financial resources, and opportunities in the digital economy.

- Initiatives like **Tamil Nadu's 'Agal Vilakku' scheme** focus on educating girl students about **safe digital practices and addressing challenges such as cyberbullying**.
- Other states can also implement similar programs that empower women with the skills **to navigate the digital world safely while tackling issues like online harassment** and promoting digital literacy.

Conclusion

Achieving gender equality in India requires **ongoing efforts to address the persistent barriers that women face in various aspects of life**. Strengthening laws, improving access to education and employment, supporting women in leadership, and creating inclusive policies are crucial steps toward empowering women. After all, if **“Development is not engendered, it is endangered”**. By **aligning targeted initiatives with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality)**, India can ensure a future where **women have equal opportunities, contributing to India's Women-led development**.

Drishti Mains Question

Examine the challenges to gender equality in India and recommend measures for improving women's participation in politics, workforce, and leadership.

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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