



Role of Women in social sustainability in India

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Abstract

Women and girls constitute about 50% of the world's population. That is, half of the human potential is also made up of women. The main goal of the fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 5) is to empower women by achieving gender equality. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to find out what is the role of women's empowerment in achieving gender equality in India and how it can make sustainable development possible. For this, the present study has used qualitative data and published sources. Studies show that the contribution of women to economic development is still less compared to men. The political sphere is also dominated by men and the role of women in the decision-making process is very low. Moreover, violence and crimes against women have increased in the last few years. Studies also say that women's participation in issues like climate change is also low in India. Therefore, the main conclusion of this study is that unless women are sufficiently empowered and gender equality is achieved, they will not be able to play a sufficient role in the economic, social, political and environmental development of the country. For sustainable development, it is necessary to give equal importance to the contributions of both men and women. This study draws the attention of policy makers to be more committed to the empowerment of women and to move towards sustainable development by utilizing the potential of the entire country.

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

Introduction: -

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the blueprint for achieving a better and sustainable future for all. The United Nations General Assembly during its 70th Session, on 25th September 2015, with the aim of taking forward the success of Millennium Development Goals, adopted the document titled "Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" consisting of 17 Sustainable Development Goals and associated 169 targets. The SDGs came into force with effect from 1st January, 2016. The SDGs are a comprehensive list of global goals integrating social, economic and environmental dimensions of development. Moreover, the SDGs are universal (for all nations), interconnected and indivisible and hence necessitate comprehensive and participatory approaches in bringing everybody together so that no one is left



behind. Countries are primarily responsible for following up and reviewing the progress made in implementing the goals and targets at the national level till 2030.

Sustainable Development and India:

The idea of sustainable development became well known after the Brundtland Report was published in 1987. It means growing in a way that is good for the environment, people, and the economy—all at the same time. In 2015, the world came together and created a plan called the 2030 Agenda. This plan includes the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are a set of 17 goals to make the world a better place. These goals focus on things like ending poverty, protecting nature, and improving health and education for everyone. To make this plan work, everyone—individuals, companies, governments, and countries—needs to work together and take action.

In 2015, the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, stated at the UN Sustainable Development Summit: "The world and our beautiful planet will greatly benefit from the sustainable development of one-sixth of humanity. It will be a world with fewer obstacles, more hope, and greater belief in its achievement." Discussions on the development of national SDG indicators have been led by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI). Furthermore, state governments play a crucial role in India's progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as they are best positioned to prioritize citizens and ensure the inclusion of all sections of society.

NITI Aayog is responsible for several key functions related to SDGs in India, including the integration of SDGs into national frameworks, mapping of initiatives related to SDGs and their targets, and the identification of lead and supporting ministries for each goal. Additionally, NITI Aayog, central ministries, and state governments receive strategic and financial support from the United Nations Country Team in India to develop plans and effectively implement the SDGs for the holistic development of the citizens.

Women Empowerment and the Indian Scenario:

Famous economist Dr. Amartya Sen said that one of the most important things in today's world is to recognize women's role in politics, the economy, and society. In other words, women should be active participants and leaders in all areas of life. Empowerment means giving people the strength and tools they need to influence decisions that affect them. For women, this includes having equal chances to earn money, take part in politics, and access things like education and healthcare.

Researchers like Malhotra and others explain that real empowerment means women can make their own important life choices, especially in areas where they didn't have control before—like marriage, work, and education. Empowerment helps women not just in their personal lives, but also improves families,



communities, and even the country. Alvarez and Lopez added that empowerment also means improving women's status through things like education, training, and awareness. So, in simple terms, women empowerment is about helping women take control of their own lives and make strong decisions about social, political, economic, and environmental issues that affect them.

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 favor 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.

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 in the Indian Scenario:

According to UNICEF, every child should be able to reach their full potential. But gender inequality—the unfair treatment of boys and girls or men and women—stops this from happening. UNICEF says gender equality means that girls and boys, and women and men, should have the same rights, freedoms, opportunities, and protection. It doesn't mean they have to be exactly the same, but they should be treated fairly. In India, this fair treatment of both men and women is often called gender equity. True gender equality can only happen when everyone has equal access to resources, chances, rewards, and basic needs. Research shows that when



there is gender inequality, women are often left out of important decisions and face more difficulties in getting what they need 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 Bachao, 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.

Gender Inequality and Women's Empowerment in India:

In India, most women still don't have financial independence or personal freedom, even though there have been improvements in education and basic healthcare. Education is often promoted, but sometimes it's mainly seen as a way to help women find better husbands, not for their own growth. In many homes, traditional gender roles are still followed, and women's independence is often discouraged. Even in politics, women are not well represented. In the 2019 elections, the number of women in politics increased a bit, but still, less than 15% of political leaders are women. There was a law proposed to reserve 33% of seats for women in Parliament and state assemblies, but due to lack of political support, it hasn't been properly implemented and is now mostly used to gain votes, not real change. However, more women are getting involved in politics at the village and grassroots level, which is a good sign.

When it comes to digital technology, there is also a gap. Only about 54% of women in India have access to mobile phones, and compared to other developing countries, even fewer women in India use the internet. So overall, if we really want to empower women and end gender inequality, we must value women for who they



are, not just for how they help others. They should be seen as important individuals with their own rights and goals.

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:

According to the UN Secretary-General, women constitute nearly half of the human capital, making them the second-largest reservoir of potential human resources after men. As stated by Giuliano (2014), women form the foundation of quality and sustainable development within families, thereby contributing to the creation of a healthy society. As leaders, decision-makers, financial managers of households, and ultimately as mothers, women fulfill numerous responsibilities. According to Mojumdar (2020), a woman is not merely a companion to her spouse but also a vital support system. She often sacrifices her own happiness, upholds moral standards, and strives to reduce her husband's stress so that he can better focus on the economic development

of the family and maintain harmony at home. Furthermore, she inspires others to make meaningful efforts and bring positive changes in their lives. Mojumdar (2020) also adds that a disciplined and well-organized family is essential for the success of the average household. Within the family, the woman performs the role of a Chief Executive Officer (CEO). In addition to managing tasks such as cooking, serving meals, doing laundry,



and overseeing household chores, she also organizes various social programs to enhance the family's social standing. Moreover, she plans and supervises a range of recreational activities that cater to the interests of both the young and the elderly members of the family.

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 talk about women's contribution to a country's social development, it's important to also look at their role in politics. Political participation is a social activity that goes beyond just political systems or cultural boundaries (Dubey and Singh, 2022). Gender has always played a role in political involvement, and this continues to be true in India today. Historically, Indian women have made a significant impact on the nation's progress. Their role during the Indian independence movement was especially important in the fight against British rule in the early 20th century. Although the Declaration of Independence mentioned women's rights, women have often had less political influence over time. After India became independent, political parties began creating women's wings, which marked a shift in the political environment. The women's right to vote movement, which started in the early 20th century, was also supported by the British colonial authorities in India. According to research, during the 2019 general elections in India, around 65% of women and 67% of men turned out to vote, showing increasing participation from women in the political space.

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.

D. Environmental Sphere:

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 female representation are continue to consider and debate 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. However, 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). Even dispute resolution and observance are better because of it (Singh 2015).

Conclusion: -

Over the past few decades, women empowerment has been a topic of global discussion. For a country like India, which is both one of the fastest-growing economies and one of the most populated, achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 is a big challenge. One of the main obstacles in this journey is gender inequality.

Studies show that in India, gender discrimination starts early in life. Whether at home, in the community, in school textbooks, movies, TV shows, or even by caregivers—both boys and girls face gender bias. Although India has made progress in addressing gender inequality, research still shows serious gaps in gender equality.

For example, many women in India still lack independence, especially when it comes to making



financial or personal decisions. While women's education and health have improved in recent years, these alone are not enough for true empowerment. Women also need social, economic, and political freedom to reach their full potential.

Women, by nature, are nurturing. They help shape young minds, make important decisions at home, and influence social values. Their participation in politics is essential for a healthy and growing society.

As India carries out more development projects, the environment is being affected more than ever. Interestingly, women have always had a close connection with nature, and they have played a key role in environmental conservation.

So, it's important to encourage women to take part and lead not just at the grassroots level, but also in policy-making roles, especially when it comes to issues like environment, society, and governance.

In the pursuit of achieving the SDGs by 2030 the international framework has directed each participating nation to focus on women empower. 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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