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Gender equality and women's empowerment: Catalysts for achieving sustainable development goals in India

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Abstract

Gender equality and the empowerment of women are essential for attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in India, particularly SDG 5. Despite advancements in certain domains, substantial gender disparities persist in education, employment, health care, and political participation. Women in India face multifaceted challenges, including restricted access to education and healthcare, economic marginalization, and gender-based violence. A paradox exists between India's rapid economic growth and enduring gender inequalities, with female labour force participation remaining low despite overall economic progress. Traditional cultural practices, such as son preference, continue to influence gender dynamics and to perpetuate disparities. Violence and discrimination against women remain prevalent issues that impede progress toward gender equality. Women play significant roles in environmental conservation, resource management, and climate action, but are frequently excluded from decision-making in these areas. Education is critical for advancing gender equality and empowering women. Women's economic empowerment through increased workforce participation and entrepreneurship is vital for the country's overall development. Political empowerment and enhanced representation of women in governance are important but remain challenging. Intersectional factors such as caste, class, and religion intersect with gender to create multiple layers of discrimination against women. There are significant regional variations in women's empowerment across different Indian states. Culturally sensitive and context-specific strategies are necessary to effectively address entrenched gender disparities. Gender equality is interconnected with and crucial for progress on other SDGs, such as poverty reduction, health, education, economic growth, and climate action. Challenges persist in implementing gender equality policies and laws due to social norms, insufficient funding, and inadequate monitoring mechanisms.

Keywords: Gender equality, women's empowerment, sustainable development goals (SDGS), India, gender disparities, sociocultural barriers, intersectionality, etc.

1. Introductions

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), introduced by the United Nations in 2016, constitute a comprehensive framework designed to address pressing global challenges with an emphasis on social, economic, and environmental development. Central to this framework is Goal 5, which aims to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls." Achieving gender equality and empowering women are pivotal to the realization of all other SDGs, as gender disparities persist in education, employment, healthcare, and political participation, thereby impeding half of the global population from contributing effectively to global progress (Kim, 2017; Shang et al., 2022) ^[21, 37]. In the Indian context, achieving gender equality and empowering women are particularly crucial, given the entrenched gender-based disparities that permeate various aspects of societal life. Women in India encounter multifaceted challenges, including limited access to education and healthcare, economic marginalization, and the prevalence of gender-based violence, which collectively hinder their full participation in society (Dhar 2018; Sen 2019) ^[11]. The SDGs present a monumental opportunity to address these entrenched issues through specific targets that emphasize the elimination of such disparities and enhancement of women's rights and opportunities (Fredman et al., 2016) ^[14]. The transition from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the SDGs reflects a growing consensus on the necessity of integrated approaches to address deeply rooted gender inequalities. Unlike the MDGs, the SDGs explicitly

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incorporate perspectives from stakeholders, including civil society and feminist movements, who advocate for robust policies and mechanisms that advance women's rights and equality (Rosche, 2016; Sen, 2019) ^[31]. This inclusive approach aims to facilitate transformative social change by embedding gender equality across all aspects of the global development agenda (Kim, 2017) ^[21]. The current challenge is to effectively integrate a transformative approach into the planning and implementation of these goals. Such an approach must not only focus on bridging gender gaps in education and employment but also address societal and cultural barriers that perpetuate gender-based discrimination. Empowering women and achieving gender equality in India is essential not only for the well-being of women but also for the broader socio-economic development of the country (Fredman et al., 2016; Hasan, 2024) ^[14, 17].

2. Background on the SDGs

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), established in 2016, aim to foster social, economic, and environmental development globally. A central component of these goals is the emphasis on gender equality and the empowerment of women, explicitly articulated in SDG Goal 5: "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls." This goal, along with gender-related targets embedded across other SDGs, is vital for addressing the persistent gender disparities that hinder comprehensive development (Sen, 2019). The formulation of SDG 5 marks a significant progression from previous global agendas, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which inadequately addressed gender inequality and women's empowerment (Fredman et al. 2016) ^[14]. The transition from the MDGs to the SDGs signifies a more holistic approach, recognizing that economic, social, and political contexts influence gender equality outcomes. This includes addressing deeply entrenched factors that obstruct women's progress (Fredman et al., 2016; Sen, 2019) ^[14]. In the Indian context, gender equality and women's empowerment are crucial for achieving SDGs, given the historical and ongoing challenges women face in the region. These challenges include economic disempowerment and gender-based violence, both of which necessitate substantial policy interventions and collaborations with women's organizations to ensure the effective implementation of SDG 5 (Dhar, 2018) ^[11]. Furthermore, the persistent gender gap in critical areas such as the economy, education, and political participation underscores the need for culturally sensitive strategies to effectively address these disparities (Kim 2017) ^[21]. Despite these advancements, the attainment of gender equality in India is impeded by political resistance, insufficient funding, and inadequate data and monitoring mechanisms (Dhar, 2018; Sen, 2019) ^[11]. Therefore, policies promoting gender equality must be contextually informed, and policymakers must engage continuously with gender equality indicators to assess and enhance progress (Onditi & Odera, 2016) ^[27]. Understanding the role of gender equality and women's empowerment in the SDGs necessitates recognizing their extensive impact on all development areas. In India, sustainable progress relies on integrating gender perspectives into all facets of SDG implementation and creating supportive environments that enable women to fully participate in the social, economic, and political spheres (Leal Filho et al., 2022) ^[22]. By focusing on these

areas, India can make substantial progress towards achieving the SDGs, leading to a more inclusive and equitable society.

3. The Centrality of SDGs-5

Gender equality, as underscored in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, is recognized as a fundamental human right and a crucial component of cultivating a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable future. The significance of SDG 5 transcends individual welfare, impacting all societal sectors and influencing the economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Primarily, gender equality directly contributes to human rights by ensuring that all individuals, irrespective of gender, have equal opportunities and freedom. It upholds the universal principles of justice and equality, aiming to eradicate discrimination and empower women and girls across various spheres of life, such as education, employment, and politics (Hasan, 2024; Sen, 2019) ^[17]. In the context of sustainable development, gender equality serves two purposes. It is not only an independent goal but also intersects with several other SDGs. For instance, reducing gender inequality can enhance educational outcomes, improve health indicators, and lead to better governance and economic growth. This interconnectedness suggests that progress in gender equality amplifies advancements in other areas of development (Alarcón et al., 2019; Hepp et al., 2019) ^[4, 18]. Furthermore, gender equality is essential for achieving peace and prosperity. Research indicates that empowering women leads to stronger and more resilient economies, as women significantly contribute to the labour force and bring diverse perspectives to decision-making processes. Inclusive societies tend to be more harmonious and stable, reducing the likelihood of conflict and fostering a spirit of cooperation and innovation (Adeleye et al., 2024) ^[1]. Culturally, initiatives such as integrating the Ubuntu philosophy into educational systems demonstrate how gender equality can be promoted by embracing cultural values that emphasize collective responsibility and humaneness. Such integration fosters environments where gender equality is normalized, leading to broader social acceptance and long-term cultural shifts towards inclusion and equality (Adewale, 2023) ^[2]. While progress has been observed since the adoption of the SDGs, challenges remain, exacerbated by global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which threatens to reverse advancements. Sustained efforts, strategic policies, and strong political commitment are essential to overcome these challenges and ensure that gender equality remains a priority on the global agenda (Odey et al., 2021) ^[25]. Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2022, 2022). Overall, achieving gender equality is not merely a moral obligation but a strategic imperative for creating a sustainable world. Cohesive actions across all levels of society and governance are required to build a future in which every individual can contribute to and benefit from a just and equitable world (Shang et al., 2022) ^[37].

4. Indian Context

This section of the study is organized into two subsections: India's Commitment to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paradox of Rapid Economic Growth and Gender Disparities. These subsections are elaborated below.

India's Commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

- 4 Integration and Implementation:** India has demonstrated a robust commitment to incorporating Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into its national agenda. This dedication is evident in various policy frameworks and initiatives designed to achieve sustainability in multiple sectors (Roy et al., 2023) ^[32].
- 5 Focus on Urban Sustainability:** Indian cities are endeavouring to enhance their performance in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), although considerable disparities persist in the attainment of these objectives across regions. Initiatives are underway to integrate environmental performance with socioeconomic development more effectively (Roy et al., 2023) ^[32].
- 6 Addressing Gender Inequality:** Although global frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to advance gender equality, ongoing gender disparities are being addressed through various initiatives designed to enhance women's rights and economic empowerment.
- 7 Environmental Integration:** India prioritizes incorporating environmental considerations into its economic development strategies, with a particular emphasis on sustainable practices to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Villalba-Eguiluz et al., 2020) ^[41].

Paradox of Rapid Economic Growth and Gender Disparities

- 8 Female Labor Force Participation:** Despite India's economic growth, female labour force participation remains notably low. This paradox underscores the enduring challenges women encounter in securing employment opportunities, thereby contributing to gender disparity in economic participation.
- 9 Son Preference:** Traditional cultural practices, such as a preference for sons, continue to exert a significant influence on gender dynamics in India. This societal norm perpetuates gender disparities, thereby affecting women's participation across various socioeconomic sectors (Kim, 2017) ^[21].
- 10 Violence against Women:** Violence and discrimination against women persist, reflecting broader gender inequities. Efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 5, which focuses on gender equality, are critically aimed at addressing these issues (Kim 2017) ^[21].
- 11 Policy Development:** There is a persistent requirement for culturally sensitive policy strategies that address entrenched gender disparities to effectively advance the comprehensive empowerment of women and girls in India (Kim 2017) ^[21].

5. Problem Statement

Gender equality and women's empowerment are crucial for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially in India's unique culture. Although there have been improvements in women's roles at home and in public, problems remain due to deep-rooted social and cultural norms (Anderson, 2024) ^[6]. The SDGs, particularly SDG 5, focus on gender equality by addressing gender-based violence, access to economic resources, and fair opportunities (Fredman et al., 2016) ^[14]. India faces specific

issues, such as low female participation in the economy and ongoing violence against women, which slow down sustainable development (Dhar, 2018) ^[11]. Research shows that gender issues affect all SDGs, requiring strategies that consider cultural and local contexts (Leal Filho et al., 2022) ^[22]. The country's socio-economic conditions, political situation, and feminist movements are key to shaping the gender equality agenda to meet these goals (Sen, 2019). A detailed analysis is needed to determine how gender equality affects various SDGs in India. This includes examining cultural barriers to women's empowerment and creating specific solutions (Kim, 2017) ^[21]. Achieving SDGs, such as quality education, economic growth, and reduced inequalities, depends on effectively including gender equality in these goals (Hasan, 2024) ^[17]. Without focused efforts on these complex issues, fully achieving the SDGs is difficult.

6. Literature Review

Numerous research articles and papers have been authored by social scientists and researchers, both in India and internationally, addressing various aspects of gender equality, women's empowerment, and sustainable development goals. The present study considers and reviews some of the most pertinent and recent articles, which are presented below.

Dash et al. (2021) ^[9] highlighted the important role of women in improving environmental, economic, and social conditions. The study shows that women have natural skills and knowledge that help them conserve, manage resources, and solve environmental problems. However, women are often excluded from decision-making and leadership roles related to climate change and the environment. The study calls for more inclusion and empowerment of women, stating that their involvement makes environmental policies more effective and leads to better and fairer results. Overall, it stresses that gender equality and women's participation are key to achieving long-term environmental and social objectives.

Sen (2020) examined the connections between gender, environment, and sustainability. The study shows that women play a key role in managing the environment and making decisions about it. This highlights that men and women use and manage natural resources differently. Women's unique knowledge and duties affect the environment. This article stresses the need to include women's views and leadership in global sustainability efforts. Gender equality is crucial for fair and effective environmental solutions. Famous female environmentalists like Rachel Carson, Vandana Shiva, and Wangari Maathai show how women can positively impact environmental stability and sustainable development. This paper argues that considering gender is important for creating policies and practices that support ecological balance and social fairness.

Pathania (2017) ^[28] examined gender equality and women's empowerment in sustainable development. This study discusses the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), focusing on SDG 5: Achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls. It emphasizes that sustainable development requires gender equality and women's participation in decision-making for effective resource allocation. This study distinguishes between gender equality (equal rights and opportunities) and gender equity

(fair treatment based on needs). The role of education in promoting gender equality is highlighted, as increased female education improves family health and income. This paper outlines targets, including eliminating discrimination and violence against women, recognizing unpaid care work, ensuring women's leadership participation, and providing reproductive health rights. It examines the roles of industry, education, and international organizations in advancing gender equality. The author concluded that achieving gender equality requires societal changes, with all SDGs contributing to women's empowerment.

Sant and Dutt (2014) ^[34] analyzed women's empowerment and gender equality in India. Women's empowerment is crucial for economic development, as women constitute half of a nation's human resources. This study examines strategies for women's empowerment across social, economic, and political dimensions, highlighting gender discrimination in India compared to other countries. This paper outlines government initiatives for women's economic empowerment, including the Support to Training and Employment Programmes for Women (STEP), Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (RGSEAG) - 'Sabla', National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW), and Rashtriya Mahila Kosh. The study discusses gender budgeting and other programs such as Working Women Hostels and Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana. The study concludes that education, changing societal attitudes, and skill development are essential for women's empowerment.

Rao (2019) ^[30] examined women's empowerment in achieving gender equality and sustainable development, focusing on developing nations. This study defines women's empowerment, gender equality, and sustainable development, emphasizing that sustainable development requires women's empowerment and gender equality. This paper discusses the importance of women's empowerment for economic growth, political development, and social progress, exploring economic feminism and issues of women in poverty and technology. It emphasizes women's participation in decision-making roles and outlines the constitutional and legal rights of women in India, including anti-discrimination protections and equality provisions. The study concludes that sustainable development requires women's empowerment and recommends measures for governmental action, including the economic, educational, and political empowerment of women.

Sana (2024) ^[33] examined why gender equality is important for sustainable development. The study states that gender equality is crucial because the unequal sharing of resources slows progress. This highlights the need to empower women and girls so that they can help and benefit from sustainable development. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has 17 goals and 169 targets to make society sustainable. Goal 5 concerns gender equality. This paper argues that gender equality is important for all goals, not just Goal 5. When women work and earn money, it helps reduce poverty (SDG 1) and improves their health, nutrition, and education (SDGs 2, 3, and 4). Although girls' education has improved, there are still gender gaps in innovation (SDG 9) and workforce participation (SDG 8). This study highlights the barriers to gender equality and suggests changing societal attitudes, making legal changes, and focusing on gender equality in policies. The study concludes that achieving gender equality requires more than just legal

steps. This calls for education on the benefits of gender equality and changing how society views women. This study stresses that empowering poor women is key to global economic growth.

Chikwe et al. (2024) ^[8] looked at ways to promote gender equality and help women in communities. They focused on empowering women and making them financially independent. This study examined local movements and programs that aim to improve women's roles in society and the economy. Using case studies and interviews, this research examined how well these community strategies help women become financially independent. The results show that local efforts have changed traditional gender roles and provided women with better access to resources. Savings groups and credit access help women become financially stable. Programs in health and education also support long-lasting changes. However, the study points out challenges, such as maintaining these efforts and cultural resistance to gender equality. This study suggests stronger partnerships between governments and community groups, flexible models, and better monitoring. This study shows the importance of community-based methods for promoting gender equality.

Wolff (2024) ^[42] investigated aid localization through local NGOs to advance women's rights and gender equality in disaster management and humanitarian efforts. This study examines the initiatives of a local NGO, the School of Agriculture for Family Independence (SAFI) in Malawi. Aid localization empowers local entities to lead and deliver assistance to enhance humanitarian intervention. Through field research, including 33 interviews with NGO members and beneficiaries, this study highlights the importance of localization in promoting gender equality and women's rights. This study examines SAFI's initiatives of SAFI that facilitated peer-to-peer knowledge transfer and improved women's living conditions in Malawi. The study shows that when local actors are involved in development and humanitarian aid, beneficiary-driven identification leads to more effective enhancement of women's rights and contributes to national resilience. This research emphasizes women's participation in humanitarian aid and their role in community resilience. This study concludes that aid localization can effectively promote gender equality, women's empowerment, and economic security in developing nations.

7. Research Gap

There are important areas of gender equality and achieving SDGs in India that require further research. We need to study how gender is connected to caste, class, and religion. It is also important to consider different regions in India. There is insufficient research on how to involve men and boys in promoting gender equality. We need more studies on how well policies are working and the challenges they face at the local level. There is not much data on how gender equality efforts affect SDG indicators, and we need more long-term studies to observe changes over time. We also need to study how climate change and digital technologies affect genders differently, the role of private companies in promoting gender equality, and include the views of different Indian women. Additionally, gender-sensitive indicators and data systems must be created to monitor SDGs in India.

8. Significance of the Study

Gender equality and women's empowerment are critical to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in India. Despite progress in civil liberties, India ranks poorly in terms of gender equality, particularly regarding economic resources and protection from gender-based violence (Anderson, 2024) ^[6]. The SDGs, notably Goal 5, address these disparities by targeting gender-based violence and reproductive health access, which the Millennium Development Goals inadequately covered (Fredman et al. 2016) ^[14]. Gender equality is crucial for addressing the social inequalities that impede sustainable development (Onditi & Odera, 2016) ^[27]. Understanding these dynamics can improve policies that promote gender equality and women's empowerment (Kim, 2017; Sen, 2019) ^[21]. Women's empowerment drives economic growth, requiring culturally nuanced approaches to address inequality (Kim, 2017) ^[21]. Examining the Indian context reveals barriers such as restrictive customs and insufficient political support, which hinder progress despite policy initiatives. These insights can enhance women's participation in the economic and political spheres, advancing SDG achievement in India (Anderson, 2024; Hasan, 2024) ^[6, 17].

9. Scope of the Study

This study examines the challenges in achieving gender equality and women's empowerment within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite progress in civil liberties, India faces barriers to gender equality due to unequal economic resources and gender violence (Anderson, 2024) ^[6]. This study focuses on SDG 5, which is dedicated to gender equality and women's empowerment, in fostering sustainable development in India. It analyzes how socioeconomic environments and institutional frameworks influence gender equality initiatives (Sen, 2019). This study examines gender equality in India, identifying obstacles such as restrictive social norms that hinder progress. It evaluates policies from the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals, which established the foundations for the current SDGs (Dhar, 2018) ^[11]. This research explores the necessary sociocultural changes and reviews the scholarly discourse on gender-based violence, economic participation, and autonomy for women's empowerment (Kim, 2017; Lima & Guedes, 2024) ^[21, 23]. This scope delineates the key areas required to understand gender equality within India's SDG framework.

10. Research Objectives:

This study aims to: (i) investigate the interconnections between Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 and other SDGs within the Indian context; (ii) evaluate India's progress on key indicators of gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE); (iii) identify the primary facilitators and obstacles to women's empowerment in India; and (iv) offer policy recommendations for leveraging GEWE to achieve SDGs.

11. Methodology

The research design incorporates both descriptive and analytical methodologies and employs secondary data sources. These sources comprise the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), reports from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), policy documents from the Government of

India (e.g., Ministry of Women and Child Development), databases from the World Bank, UNDP, and UN Women, and peer-reviewed academic journals and books. The analytical approach involves thematic analysis to assess the impact of Gender Equality and Women's empowerment (GEWE) indicators on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets. Statistical data were used to demonstrate the correlations.

12. Analysis: GEWE as a Catalyst for SDGs in India

This section of the study is organized into two subsections: "India's Progress on Key GEWE Indicators" and "Examining the Interlinkages (SDG-Specific Analysis)." These subsections are elaborated upon in detail below.

12.1 India's Progress on Key Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Indicators

12.1.1 Education: Education is pivotal in advancing women's empowerment and achieving gender equality in India. In India, significant investments have been directed towards enhancing female education, acknowledging its critical role in both personal and societal development. Education enhances self-confidence, decision-making capabilities, and engagement in public life, thereby substantially contributing to women's empowerment and gender equality (Engida 2021) ^[12]. However, challenges such as disparities in access and resource constraints continue to hinder further progress.

12.1.2 Health: Health is an essential aspect of gender equality, as health disparities can impede women's participation in the workforce and restrict their societal roles. Enhancing women's health through targeted interventions is crucial for achieving gender parity (Mishra et al., 2020) ^[24]. In India, initiatives have been undertaken to improve women's health outcomes; however, challenges such as insufficient healthcare access and gender-biased medical attention persist.

12.1.3 Economic Participation: Although women's economic participation in India has the potential to significantly enhance economic growth, it remains below the global average. Factors such as limited access to economic resources and entrenched gender norms impede Indian women's full engagement in the economy (Anderson, 2024) ^[6]. To improve their participation in the economic sector, it is imperative to address these barriers through policy reforms and support for women entrepreneurs (Ayodeji et al., 2025) ^[7].

12.1.4 Political Participation: India demonstrates commendable performance in terms of female political participation, a development facilitated by policies that promote women's involvement in governance. Political empowerment plays a crucial role in influencing women's economic and managerial positions and enhancing their decision-making capabilities (Al-Qahtani et al., 2020) ^[5].

12.1.5 Agency and Violence: Agency, particularly in addressing gender-based violence, represents a crucial domain in which India requires significant advancement. Despite government initiatives, women continue to encounter pervasive discrimination and violence, frequently perpetuated by deeply rooted local customs (Anderson,

2024)^[6]. Enhancing women's agency through the promotion of legal rights and the provision of support systems is essential for comprehensive empowerment.

Examining the Interlinkages (SDG-Specific Analysis)

12.2.1 SDG 1 (No Poverty): Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) can substantially mitigate poverty by ensuring equitable access to economic resources, employment opportunities, and decision-making processes across all levels. The economic empowerment of women enhances household income and fosters community development, thereby exerting a direct influence on poverty alleviation (Dhar, 2018; Onditi & Odera, 2016)^[11, 27].

12.2.2 SDG 2 (Zero Hunger): Women's empowerment is essential for addressing hunger and ensuring food security in India. Women play a significant role in agricultural production and food distribution, particularly in rural regions. Addressing gender inequalities in agriculture could enhance productivity and food security, thereby contributing to the goal of zero hunger (Fleetwood 2020)^[13].

12.2.3 SDG 3 (Good Health): Empowering women significantly enhances health outcomes by facilitating improved access to healthcare services, education, and nutrition. Women's health directly influences community health and economic productivity, emphasizing the need to incorporate women's perspectives into health-related strategies (Dhar, 2018)^[11].

12.2.4 SDG 4 (Quality Education): Promoting gender equality in education is crucial for empowering women. Education enhances women's participation in the workforce and decision-making processes, thereby contributing to a more equitable society. Gender-focused educational policies have the potential to bridge educational disparities and promote sustainable development (Rosche 2016)^[31].

12.2.5 SDG 8 (Decent Work): Advancing Gender Equality and Women's empowerment (GEWE) can facilitate inclusive economic growth by ensuring equitable participation in the labour market. Empowering women in the workplace enhances innovation, productivity, and economic resilience. Addressing gender disparities could significantly contribute to achieving decent work for all (Olubiyi et al., 2022)^[26].

12.2.6 SDG 13 (Climate Action): Women's empowerment is crucial for effective climate action because women frequently experience a disproportionate impact on environmental challenges. Their active participation in environmental management and policymaking can result in more sustainable outcomes. Empowering women enhances community resilience to climate change and supports sustainable environmental practices (Khoshnava et al., 2019)^[20].

13. Challenges and Barriers

The challenges and barriers to women's empowerment in India span various domains.

Socio-Cultural Barriers

13 Gender Norms and Traditions: Traditional gender norms and societal expectations frequently confine

women to domestic roles, thereby restricting their access to education, employment opportunities, and personal autonomy (Anderson 2024)^[6].

14 Marriage and Family Structures: Early marriage and familial expectations often overshadow women's personal ambitions, impacting their educational and professional prospects (Desai & Andrist, 2010)^[10].

15 Cultural Practices: Practices such as dowries and societal gender biases serve as foundational elements of discrimination, thereby impeding women's social status and autonomy (Gupta & Yesudian, 2006)^[15].

Economic Barriers

13 Employment Disparities: Economic empowerment is undermined by disparities in access to resources and employment opportunities, with persistent gender wage gaps being a significant issue (Anderson, 2024)^[6].

14 Land Ownership: Despite the existence of legal rights, women rarely own land due to socio-cultural barriers that impede the practical realization of these rights. Consequently, only approximately 14% of rural households have female landowners (Agarwal et al., 2021)^[3].

15 Entrepreneurship Challenges: Women's engagement in local agricultural and entrepreneurial activities is constrained by societal norms and the absence of economic support systems (Quisumbing et al., 2021)^[29].

Political and Institutional Barriers:

13 Participation in Decision-Making: Women are underrepresented in political and institutional decision-making bodies, which consequently impacts policy reforms aimed at achieving gender equality (Anderson, 2024)^[6].

14 Implementation of Laws: Although progressive legislation has been enacted, its implementation and societal acceptance remain insufficient, resulting in a gap between legal rights and the realities of daily life (Agarwal et al., 2021)^[3].

Intersectional Disparities

13 Multiple Identities: Women encounter multifaceted discrimination at the intersections of gender, caste, religion, and class, which impacts their empowerment in personal, social, and professional contexts (Haq 2013)^[16].

14 Regional and Socio-Economic Variances: Regional disparities in empowerment indices reveal substantial variations in the socio-cultural and economic empowerment of women across different Indian states (Gupta & Yesudian, 2006)^[15].

The barriers encountered by women in India exemplify the intricate interplay of cultural, economic, and institutional factors, underscoring the necessity for targeted interventions to address these multifaceted challenges.

14. Discussion

The role of gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) in attaining Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in India is complex, with profound implications for both social and economic advancement. This analysis

explores key aspects related to synthesizing findings, interpreting paradoxes, the necessity for a paradigm shift, and the consequences of inaction.

Synthesis of Findings: Gender Equality and Women's empowerment (GEWE) are crucial components in advancing nearly all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is attributed to GEWE's role in fostering inclusivity and equity and its capacity to enhance economic growth and social progress. Nevertheless, the integration of gender perspectives into various developmental policies remains inconsistent, potentially impeding optimal outcomes. The cross-cutting nature of GEWE indicates that it serves as a potent catalyst for progress across multiple sectors when applied systematically.

Interpreting the Paradox: Despite India's significant economic growth in recent decades, corresponding advancements in gender equality have not been observed. This paradox can be examined from various perspectives, such as enduring sociocultural norms that favour patriarchal structures and confine women's roles to traditional spheres. Furthermore, systemic barriers, including unequal access to education and employment, impede women's full participation in economic activities, thereby rendering economic growth insufficient to promote gender equality (Stoltzfus et al., 2011) ^[39].

Need for a Paradigm Shift: A significant transformation is required in the perception of women, shifting from viewing them as mere recipients of development initiatives to acknowledging them as proactive agents capable of effecting meaningful change in society. This necessitates the establishment of environments where women can exercise agency and leadership in various domains, including the economic, political, and social spheres. Highlighting women's contributions at all levels can enhance their empowerment and facilitate progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) more comprehensively (Verpoest et al., 2023) ^[40].

Cost of Inaction: The economic and social ramifications of neglecting gender inequality are substantial and far-reaching. Persistent disparities can result in suboptimal human capital development and constrain economic productivity because of a lack of diverse perspectives. Such inaction may exacerbate social stratification and impede sustainable development. For example, failure to address gender disparities can lead to significant economic losses, as evidenced by contexts where preventable issues such as undernutrition impose considerable economic burdens (Jain et al., 2024) ^[19].

Critically addressing these aspects necessitates implementing evidence-based policies and interventions that foster gender-inclusive growth and empower women to play pivotal roles in India's developmental trajectory.

15. Policy Recommendations

The following are policy recommendations aimed at advancing gender equality and empowering women in the context of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in India.

15.1 Strengthening Legal Frameworks: Existing legislation should be enforced and expanded to safeguard women's rights, ensuring comprehensive protection against gender-based violence, discrimination, and other rights violations (Anderson, 2024; Sen, 2019) ^[6].

15.2 Investing in Care Infrastructure: Enhancing and expanding care services, including childcare facilities and eldercare support, is essential for mitigating the disproportionate caregiving responsibilities borne by women and facilitating their increased participation in the workforce (Kim, 2017) ^[21].

15.3 Promoting Economic Inclusion: Enhance women's access to economic resources and opportunities by implementing targeted financial initiatives, promoting female entrepreneurship, and ensuring equitable remuneration for equivalent work (Sen, 2019; Shankar et al., 2018) ^[38].

15.4 Enhancing Political Participation: Women's participation in political processes should be promoted and facilitated by eliminating barriers to entry, providing training programs, and instituting quotas or reserved seats within political institutions (Fredman et al., 2016) ^[14].

15.5 Gender-Responsive Budgeting: Adopt gender-responsive budgeting practices to ensure that government budgets systematically address gender disparities and prioritize expenditures on programs that benefit women and girls (Anderson 2024) ^[6].

15.6 Changing Social Norms: Implement awareness campaigns and educational initiatives aimed at challenging and transforming traditional gender norms and stereotypes that impede women's empowerment and equality (Dhar, 2018; Kim, 2017) ^[11, 21].

These recommendations are designed to align policy initiatives with the strategic objectives delineated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to facilitate significant advancements in gender equality and women's empowerment in India.

16. Findings of the Study

Based on the provided text, the key findings of the study on the role of gender equality and women's empowerment in achieving Sustainable Development Goals in India are as follows:

- **16.1** Gender equality and women's empowerment are crucial for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in India, particularly SDG 5, which focuses on gender equality.
- **16.2** Despite progress in some areas, significant gender disparities persist in India in education, employment, healthcare, and political participation.
- **16.3** Women in India face multifaceted challenges, including limited access to education and healthcare, economic marginalization, and gender-based violence.
- **16.4** There is a paradox between India's rapid economic growth and persistent gender inequalities, with female labour force participation remaining low despite overall economic progress.

- **16.5** Traditional cultural practices like son preference continue to influence gender dynamics and perpetuate disparities.
- **16.6** Violence and discrimination against women remain prevalent issues that hinder progress toward gender equality goals.
- **16.7** Women play important roles in environmental conservation, resource management, and climate action, but are often excluded from decision-making in these areas.
- **16.8** Education is highlighted as critical for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.
- **16.9** Women's economic empowerment through increased workforce participation and entrepreneurship is seen as the key to overall development.
- **16.10** Political empowerment and increased representation of women in governance are important but remain a challenge.
- **16.11** Intersectional factors such as caste, class, and religion intersect with gender to create multiple layers of discrimination.
- **16.12** There are significant regional variations in women's empowerment across different Indian states.
- **16.13** Culturally sensitive and context-specific strategies are required to effectively address entrenched gender disparities.
- **16.14** Gender equality is interconnected with and crucial for progress on other SDGs like poverty reduction, health, education, economic growth, and climate action.
- **16.15** Challenges remain in the implementation of gender equality policies and laws due to social norms, insufficient funding, and inadequate monitoring mechanisms.

17. Conclusion

This study examines the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in India. This shows that gender differences affect sustainable development in many areas. Although India's economy is growing, gender inequality continues to slow progress toward the SDGs. This gap between economic growth and gender inequality shows how social norms, institutional barriers, and economic factors perpetuate gender discrimination. Traditions such as a preference for sons and limiting gender roles affect how society views women and prevent them from fully participating in economic, political, and social life. The study finds that gender equality and women's empowerment are crucial for achieving SDG 5 and help progress on other SDGs. Empowering women in education, health, work, and politics can reduce poverty, improve food security, support climate action, and enhance sustainable development. However, the inclusion of gender perspectives in development policies is inconsistent, which can limit success. To address these issues, we must change how women are perceived and included in development. Women should be viewed as active participants, not just beneficiaries. This change requires creating an environment where women can lead and make decisions. The study suggests focusing on areas such as improving legal systems, investing in care services, promoting economic inclusion, increasing political participation, using gender-responsive

budgeting, and changing social norms. These steps aim to align policies with SDG goals and advance gender equality and women's empowerment in India. In conclusion, achieving gender equality and empowering women is not only the right thing to do but also necessary for India's sustainable development. Ignoring this can lead to poor human capital development, lower economic productivity, and increased social inequality. As India works to meet its SDG goals, focusing on gender equality and women's empowerment through evidence-based policies is key to inclusive growth and ensuring that no one is left behind.

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