

Bridging the Gender Gap -Key to Sustainable Development: Case Study of India

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Submitted: 13/03/2024 **Revised:** 28/04/2024 **Accepted:** 05/05/2024

Abstract: Attaining gender equality by bridging the gender gap is a primary concern for nations across the globe today. International agencies like the United Nations, World Economic Forum and the sister organizations-all are working towards a common goal of attaining gender equality by 2030, a key agenda of the UN Sustainable Development Goal. However, statistics indicate a grim picture of the road to achieving this ambitious target. The research paper takes a fresh look into the global standing with respect to the gender equality indices, initiatives taken to bridge the gender gap. The paper also aims at assessing the reasons behind the gender gap as well as explores the initiatives taken globally to bridge the gap. Last but not the least the paper analyses India's position with respect to the gender equality parameters, aims to assess the initiatives taken, and analyse the obstacles on the path to attain gender parity.

Keywords: *UN Sustainable Development, parameters, obstacles.*

The United Nations goal to attain gender parity by 2030 sets an ambitious target for member states to bridge the gender gap. The idea of ensuring equal rights and opportunity for all females across the globe and creating an atmosphere free of gender-based violence and discrimination. Attainment of gender equality is an essential component of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 2015. It is increasingly being recognized that female have a key role to play in all the SDGs, as several goals specifically recognize gender parity and female empowerment as the agenda and also part of the solution. Ever since 1975 being designated the International Women Year by the UN, there has been tremendous work done by the member states towards improving the condition of women. Still a lot needs to be done to achieve the global goal of SDG- 5. The research paper attempts to assess the gender gap, with specific reference to India, to assess India's position with respect to gender equality, a vital component for India to attain a developed nation status by 2047.

Nations across the world have achieved several milestones with respect to gender equality over the past decades, it still remains a major issue across the globe. However, its levels and pressing issues have regional as well as global variations. In simple terms, gender equality aims at granting equal rights and opportunities to both the sex in all aspects. There are various parameters whereby a country's gender equality is assessed. The Global Gender Gap Index carries out an assessment of the equality indicators in different countries across the globe. As per a 2024 data, the index benchmarks 14

indicators of gender gap with respect to economy, polity, education and health. The top position has been bagged by Iceland followed by countries like Finland and Norway with Afghanistan at the lowest rung of this index. Conflicts and crisis in any part of the world perpetuate the gender gap (Einar, 2024).

Global statistics with regard to gender gap and related issues indicate a dire picture of the gender gap. A report by the World Economic Forum on Global Gender Gap released this year (2024) estimates that it would take 134 years, which meant full gender parity can be achieved by 2158, five generations beyond the 2030 SDG target. It further indicates that 97 per cent of global economies have bridged over 60 per cent of gender gap, which is a significant increase from 85 per cent in 2006 (Vitasta, 2024). Another research indicates that it would take over another 150 years to achieve gender equal society in various regions of the world. South Asia, West Asia and North Africa need to go a long way in bridging the gender gap. Whereas Europe, which has bridged over 76 percent of the gender gap, still needs another 67 years to fully close it (Dyvik, 2024). Another report indicates that each dollar investment in female healthcare would result in approximately three dollars in economic growth. Bridging the gender gap could even enhance the world economy by one trillion dollars by the year 2040 with reduction in mortality, rise in female capacity to contribute in various sectors of economy (Ellengrid, P., Peterson & Sartori, 2024). Below given are some statistics which may help us to assess the gender gap that still exists across the globe: -

- A World Health Organisation (WHO) report (2021) indicates that one out of three female worldwide were affected due to sexual violence.

- Another report by the UN Women (2022) indicates that one female is killed by someone of her own family at an interval of 11 minutes.
- Another WHO report (2023) indicates that each day 800 women die across the world due to pregnancy related issues or during childbirth and poor access to modern contraception.
- Another data by the Center for Reproductive Rights (2024) indicates that 40% women across the globe live in countries with restrictive abortion laws.
- As per a WHO, 2024 report, more than twelve thousand females are under threat of female genital mutilation each day.
- An OCDE (2020-2021) report suggests that just four percent of the Official Development Assistance flows goes straight for female empowerment projects.
- As per UN Women (2024) data only 10% of female are leading the nations as head of states across the world.
- A World Bank (2024) indicates that women enjoy less than two-third of legal rights available to men.
- An ILO (2022) report puts the gender pay gap across the globe at 20% (Special Focus, 2024).

The above data indicates that we are far from attaining gender equality globally and the goal of achieving it by 2030 seems a distant dream. Another data released by the UN Women attempts to ascertain major impediments in the road to global gender equality. A 2023 report on gender analyses the genders equality indices among the 17 SDGs and figures out 11 major impediments or challenges in the road to gender equality. These are low representation of women in decision making or leadership roles, poverty and lesser job or income options, job discrimination, glass ceiling, no income for care work within household, socio-cultural practices, inadequate attention given to female with respect to education, food, health, sanitation and rampant violence against women, lesser grants for gender parity projects, inadequate legislation and its poor enforcement (UN Women, 2023). Hence the UN and its, member states adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, including Target 5 aimed at achieving parity with respect to gender by empowering the female populace.

Let us examine the global targets set under SDG 5 before assessing the situation in India with respect to gender parity. The goals are: to put an end to any kind of discrimination or gender-based violence female, including genital mutilation. In the domestic realm, it aims to end forced marriages, give value to unpaid care work and promote sharing of responsibilities within the

household and family. On the political front, it aims to provide females with equal opportunity in decision making and leadership roles in all spheres of life. Besides it aims at providing universal access to Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights as per international conventions. Another target is to undertake reforms so that females are treated equally in all aspects such as property, inheritance rights as per law. It aims to promote female empowerment through enhanced use of technology. Above all the attainment of all these goals requires policy and legislative support to attain gender parity by 2030 (The global goals.org).

POLICY INITIATIVES

It may be mentioned that the fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 aimed at formulating a global policy framework and adopted blueprint to attain gender equality. However, since only seven years are left for nations to achieve their SDG target-5 of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal, a lot of initiatives and efforts are required to this end. Let us examine some of the initiatives taken to this end. There is a noticeable increase in financial grants to \$64 billion in 2022 from \$53 billion in 2021, in order to carry out projects aimed at bringing about gender parity. In 2021, France which ranks 6th in the EU on the Gender Equality Index had committed a share of its bilateral aid to invest in projects meant for bringing about gender parity, however, reports suggest that France has still not met its commitments (Focus 2030, 2024).

CASE STUDY OF INDIA

Reports suggest that India under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi are aiming to make India a five trillion economy and a developed nation by 2047. However, economists suggest that to achieve this goal, India will have to boost the number of women in the workforce. As per a 2023 data, women's participation in the labor force in India stood at 33%, a rise from 27% in 2022. A 2024 Gender parity index data indicates that India is 134th in women's labour force participation. Out of every 100 rupees earned by a male, a female earns only 40 rupees (The Telegraph Online, 2024). Let us assess the gender gap in the Indian context. Gender inequality and discrimination issues have been deep-rooted social issue in India prevalent for several centuries. In India. Since 2006, the World Economic Forum evaluates the state of gender parity in a given country every year. It uses four major indices such as economic participation, opportunity, level of education, health and mortality rate as well as political empowerment. India ranked 129th in the 2024 Global Gender Gap Index, out of 146 countries surveyed, a slip of two places from 2023, when it ranked 127th. The two places dip has been attributed to slight decline in educational attainment and political

empowerment. India has closed only 64.1% gender gap this year (2024), making it the third lowest in the region (Kusum, K. Sadia, 2024).

Below mentioned is the latest statistics released by the World Economic Forum (WEF). It shares the gender gap with regard to India pertaining four indices. A fair understanding of these indices may help us to assess the situation in the country.

Gender Gap Index: India

Country	Rank	Overall Score	Economic Participation & Opportunity	Educational Attainment	Health & Survival	Political Empowerment
India	129	0.641	0.398	0.964	0.951	0.251

Note, the above scores range from 0 to 1, with 1 = gender parity.

Source: WEF, Global Gender Gap Index 2024 (Kusum, K. Sadia , 2024)

Each of the parameters indicates that a lot needs to be done in all the four sectors in order to women’s contribution to the Indian economy. Following the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution, women’s representation saw a 40% rise as compared to only 15.1% perceptible representation of women in the Parliament. There is scope for improvement in this figure with the passage of Women’s Reservation Bill, which proposes reservation of 33% of seats for women. However, ‘Economic Participation’ and ‘Opportunity’ index indicate slight improvement, continuing an upward trend over the past four years, however, women’s share in senior positions and technical roles have dropped. India’s primary concern with respect to health and survival is that females have access to nutrition, better maternal health (The Telegraph Online, 2024). Latest data by India’s Economic Survey indicates that India’s sex ratio at birth has risen from 918 in 2014-2015 to 930 in 2023-24. The maternal mortality has also seen a fall from 130/lakh live births in 2014-16 to 97/lakh live births in 2018-20. Analysts suggest that access to education for females at all levels of school and college as well as paid work is essential for maintaining their nutrition and improvement in all indices pertaining to women. Since females contribute heavily to unpaid domestic work, they are left with less time or energy to opt for paid work. Hence providing them with a job-assured education would result in improvement in all development indices with respect to female health and nutrition and enhance their chances of survival. The Government of India has undertaken a number of initiatives to integrate females into mainstream workforce. Schemes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Mahila Shakti Kendra, Ujjwala Yojana have been undertaken to rehabilitate and empower women. Government initiatives and schemes have had perceptible improvement in the skilling and rehabilitating a large number of females which would certainly result in better health and survival (PIB, 2022).

An assessment of the gender gap and impediments to establish gender equality is incomplete without the assessment of nature and root of the problem. The roots of gender equality lies in the patriarchal and patrilineal nature of Indian society. The social structure is such that men wields decision making powers and are in leadership roles. Hence, they enjoy a privileged position in the family, with respect to property, inheritance, performance of last rites etc. These are the root causes for preference of male child and hence male dominance in Indian society and larger parts of globe (Statista Research Department, 2023).

All this has also resulted in gender related violence and sexual assault faced by women. Lack of safety for women in public spaces has contributed to their low numbers in the workforce. Some women are not allowed to travel far from home to attend school or training programs, proving that the fear and uncertainty of being sexually assaulted remains a big barrier in bridging the gender gap in India. Such issues require long-term intervention such as educating and sensitizing children inorder to create an attitudinal shift towards gender bias, spreading awareness to break the myths, stereotypes around gender issues through various programmes, activities and consistent effort. One also needs to ensure State accountability in implementing various schemes, policies, laws, constitutional guarantees and international commitments towards gender equality (Cry, 2024). In nutshell gender mainstreaming and its effective implementation as well as creating societal awareness and attitudinal change is the most important way forward to achieve gender equality in India. Efforts are not only required at the state level but also from the civil society as well as individual. There is a need for community ownership to prevent gender-based violence.

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