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### **Message from the Teacher in Charge**

Loreto College is proud to present the first edition of its online journal – Loreto College Journal of Humanities and Social Science. This initiative marks a significant milestone in our commitment to fostering academic inquiry and interdisciplinary dialogue.

In this edition we are delighted to feature insightful and absorbing articles which explore the intersection of sustainability, democracy, gender, environment and marginality.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to the entire editorial team and to the editor Dr. Krishnokoli Hazra, Head of the Department of History, for her thoughtful coordination. We are grateful to our peer reviewers for their invaluable academic support.

Congratulations to all the contributors for their insightful research and dedication. We hope this journal will inspire further scholarship, engage curious minds, and serve as a valuable resource for future research.

Happy reading!

**Sr. Dr. A. Nirmala**



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## Editorial

We are happy to announce the publication of the first issue of the *Loreto College Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, a multidisciplinary, peer-reviewed online journal published by Loreto College, Kolkata. The journal will be published annually. The theme of this issue is Democracy, Equity and Gender as Pathways to Sustainability. Given the urgency and immediacy of the climate crisis, the need to centre sustainability as an ethical principle in current intellectual endeavours, is imperative. Marginalised groups, including women and the economically disadvantaged, are often the most at risk when sustainability is overlooked. Our panel of contributors have examined the theme through a host of thought-provoking articles which analyse perspectives and interventions on environment, gender, democracy and sustainability.

Our heartfelt gratitude to the authors of the articles for their meaningful explorations of the theme and to the reviewers for their meticulous assessments. We are immensely grateful to Sr. Dr. A. Nirmala, Teacher-in Charge, Loreto College, who was the first to initiate the idea of a multidisciplinary journal for the college; this journal would not have been possible without her constant support. We are also indebted to the Advisory Board of the journal and the IQAC Coordinator of the college, Dr. Amrita Dasgupta for their invaluable guidance.

Krishnokoli Hazra

May 2025



## Unstoppable Force: How Microfinance Supercharged Women Empowerment and Drove Sustainable Development in India (2006-2024)

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### Abstract

This study explores women's empowerment through microfinance by focusing on key factors such as savings with banks, access to credit, and loan repayment performance. All these factors fall under the dimension of economic empowerment. The initiative was launched by NABARD across India in 1992. The study utilizes data from the Rural Credit Innovations Department of NABARD for the period 2006-07 to 2023-24 and CPI for rural from RBI.

The findings of this study reveal that per SHG savings in real terms for women are higher than for men, with statistical significance at 6% level. The second indicator of women's empowerment, access to credit in real term, also shows that women have higher per SHG credit compared to men. This factor is highly statistically significant at 1% level. These results highlight the importance of microfinance in enhancing women's economic empowerment. The combined average percentage of outstanding loans over the years is 69.50% for women, slightly lower than 70.24% for men. This finding suggests that women's SHGs generally exhibit stronger loan repayment patterns compared to their male counterparts.

Microfinance serve as effective tools for promoting women's empowerment and sustainable development in rural India. Policymakers and stakeholders can leverage these findings to enhance the reach and efficiency of microfinance initiatives, ensuring greater economic and social inclusion for women. The study provides realistic evidence on the impact of microfinance on women's empowerment in India over an extended period, highlighting its critical role in achieving sustainable development goals.

**Keywords:** *Microfinance, Women's Empowerment, Savings, Access to Credit and Loan Repayment*

### Introduction:

Microfinance is a financial service that provides small loans, savings, insurance, and other financial products to individuals and small businesses that lack access to traditional banking services. It is primarily aimed at helping low-income individuals, especially in developing countries, to improve their economic conditions. The declaration of micro-credit Summit in Washington, DC in 1997 defined micro-credit programs as those



“extending small loans to poor people for self-employment projects that generate income, allowing them to care for themselves and their families”. There are some features of microfinance- small loan, encourages individuals to open savings accounts and save money securely, collateral free, group lending & peer support, financial training & empowerment-many microfinance programs provide financial literacy, business skills, and training to borrowers etc. Microcredit has been developed as an alternative model of non-state interventionist approach which has been popularized worldwide by Professor Yunus. But in India, it is totally opposite approach. The financial inclusion through microfinance model is broadly operated by NABARD which is called state interventionist approach.

Women empowerment is a multidimensional concept that encompasses various aspects of women's lives, enabling them to gain control over their choices, resources, and opportunities. The key dimensions of women empowerment include: 1. Economic Empowerment: Financial independence and entrepreneurship; Ownership of assets (land, property, and businesses) Participation in economic decision-making; Access to employment and equal wages; 2. Social Empowerment 3. Political Empowerment 4. Legal Empowerment 5. Psychological Empowerment: 6. Familial / Interpersonal Empowerment 7. Technological and Digital Empowerment and 8. Health Empowerment. These dimensions reflect the complex nature of women's empowerment and its impact on individual and societal development. Empowering women is not just about ensuring their rights but about improving their ability to make decisions and lead fulfilling lives. This study contributes the economic empowerment among the eight dimensions of women's empowerment.

Microfinance institutes play a crucial role in women's empowerment by providing financial resources like saving with bank, loan and repayment facilities, training, and opportunities for women, especially in underserved communities. Here's how it contributes to their empowerment: Financial Independence - microfinance gives women access to small loans, savings, and credit, allowing them to start or expand businesses. With their own income, women gain financial independence, reducing their reliance on male family members. Entrepreneurship and Employment- women can invest in small businesses, such as farming, tailoring, or retail, creating employment for themselves and others. This fosters economic growth and self-sufficiency within communities. Increased decision-making power: Having financial resources enables women to make household and business decisions. They gain greater control over family finances, children's education, and healthcare. Overall, microfinance is a powerful tool for women's empowerment, providing them with the financial means, confidence, and skills to improve their lives and contribute to society. Therefore, such empowerment is an important goal among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (2018); it is also a significant indicator of socio-economic development (Geleta et al., 2017; Nassani et al., 2019). This study evaluates the impact of microfinance on women's empowerment, initiated by NABARD in 1992, over the period from 2006-07 to 2023-24. This paper examines women's empowerment through microfinance by focusing on key factors such as savings with banks, access to credit, and loan repayment performance.

This paper is structured as follows: the second section analyses literature review; the third section deals with objective and methodology; the fourth section discourses the discussion of the findings; the fifth section, which includes the summary and conclusions of the study.

### Literature review

Defining women's empowerment is a fundamental question among scholars, with various academicians



offering diverse perspectives. These definitions highlight different dimensions of empowerment. Below, we will discuss these viewpoints one by one, exploring how each contributes to understanding the concept and its significance in promoting autonomy, agency, and equality for women in society. Defining women's empowerment is multifaceted, with various interpretations in the literature. Broadly, it involves enabling women to live with dignity, respect, self-esteem, and self-reliance, empowering them to make autonomous decisions. Scholars have explored this concept through various lenses, emphasizing its multifaceted nature in the following way.

Lorraine M Gutierrez (1990) describes empowerment as the enhancement of personal, interpersonal, or political power, enabling individuals to improve their life circumstances. Similarly, Nobel laureate A.K. Sen (1993) views empowerment through the lens of an individual's capability set, shaped by personal attributes and social structures. Both perspectives emphasize empowerment as a process of expanding opportunities, autonomy, and agency, allowing women to transform their lives and contribute meaningfully to society. Syet M Hashemi et al. (1996), for instance, measured women's empowerment using indicators such as mobility, decision-making ability for significant purchases, and political and legal awareness. L Mayoux (1998) views empowerment as a process of internal transformation, emphasizing women's capacity to make informed decisions. Similarly, Kabeer (2001) underscores the importance of enhancing women's decision-making power within households as a fundamental aspect of agency.

The United Nations' Guidelines on Women's Empowerment highlight five essential components: self-worth, the ability to make life choices, access to opportunities and resources, control over one's life, and the power to influence social change. These elements collectively serve as a comprehensive framework for fostering women's empowerment. Expanding on this, A. Malhotra, SR Schuler and C. Boender (2002) argue that empowerment is multidimensional, encompassing economic, socio-cultural, familial, legal, political, and psychological dimensions. This holistic approach highlights the interconnected nature of empowerment across various domains of life.

Economic empowerment is particularly significant, as access to credit and income-generating activities strengthens women's bargaining power within households. S Cheston and L Kuhn (2002) point out that participation in microfinance programs plays a pivotal role in this regard. By facilitating women's economic engagement, microfinance enhances their ability to make decisions and achieve greater independence. A Krishna (2003) defines empowerment as building individuals' capacity to make life choices and translating those choices into desired outcomes, a process that requires both internal growth and external opportunities.

Kabeer (2005) further describes empowerment as a process by which individuals who were previously deprived of choice gain the ability to make decisions and exercise agency. This transformation is particularly relevant for women in patriarchal societies, where structural barriers often limit their autonomy. Ranjula Bali Swain and Fan Yang Wallentin (2009) found that participation in microfinance programs enables women to challenge traditional gender norms and make independent choices. These groups foster a sense of collective solidarity, allowing women to address shared challenges and advocate for their rights.

Maheshwari M and Shobhna Goyal (2014) proposed that Self-Help Groups (SHGs) could maximize outreach and alleviate poverty among rural, disadvantaged populations. SHG-based microfinance has empowered rural women in some Indian states, acting as a catalyst for social change and income generation. By improving poor people's access to the formal banking system, microfinance fosters economic growth and sustainable



development, lifting many above the poverty line

Srirang Jha (2019) explored the transformative impact of microfinance on the socio-economic empowerment and sustainable livelihoods of the poor, emphasizing dignity and self-respect. Drawing from conceptual and empirical studies, Jha found that microfinance significantly alleviates poverty and empowers vulnerable segments in India. He recommended that SHG members gain financial independence and the ability to make decisions, enhancing their resilience with dignity. However, he noted the limited presence of microfinance institutions in urban areas, suggesting a need for expansion.

Overall, women's empowerment encompasses enhancing their agency, decision-making power, and access to resources. It is a dynamic process that enables women to lead fulfilling lives, contribute to societal development, and influence social change. By addressing barriers and creating opportunities for women's sharing in economic and social activities, empowerment fosters equality and transforms societies for the better.

### Objectives

1. To investigate women's empowerment in relation to sustainable development through the bank-linked microfinance savings model across India during the period 2006-07 to 2023-24.
2. To analyze the role of yearly disbursed microfinance loans (or access to credit by SHG) in fostering women's empowerment by facilitating access to finance for production activities in India over the same timeframe.
3. To evaluate the outstanding loans and Repayment performance of women Self-Help Groups and their impact on sustainable transformation during the said period.

### Methodology

This study relies on secondary sources, with data collected from the Rural Credit Innovations Department of NABARD (2006-07 to 2023-24) and CPI on rural from RBI (Base: 2012 = 100 for New CPI). The analysis covers 18 years, as systemic data before 2006-07 is unavailable.

The study examines three key indicators of women's empowerment: savings performance with banks, bank loans which depends on their savings, and repayment performance compared to men. To analyze financial trends, the average savings, loan disbursement, and outstanding amounts of Self-Help Groups are calculated in real terms using the formula:  $\text{Real term} = (\text{Nominal term} \div \text{CPI}) \times 100$ . The Percentage of Outstanding (P.O) is determined using the formula:  $\text{P. O} = (\text{Outstanding per SHG in Real Term} \div \text{Loan per SHG in Real Term}) \times 100$  for  $i^{\text{th}}$  year.

The study employs simple arithmetic calculations and illustrative diagrams to present the findings effectively. Further, we used the t-statistic to test the significance of savings per SHG and loans disbursed per SHG for both women and men in real terms. We assessed whether these factors are statistically significant for each gender. Women's SHGs, initiated by NABARD in 1992, serve as the core platform for



women's empowerment. The analysis highlights their role in improving savings, access to credit, and repayment discipline, offering valuable insights into their impact on women's financial independence.

**Discussion of the findings:** This section explores women's empowerment through microfinance, initiated by NABARD across India in 1992, with a focus on economic factors. We analyze three key indicators: savings with banks, loans disbursed, and outstanding loans. Savings represent future consumption and play a crucial role in economic empowerment. They enable women to make independent financial decisions, particularly for business expansion in self-employment projects like poultry farming. Access to microfinance enhances financial stability, encouraging entrepreneurial activities and improving livelihoods. By fostering economic independence, microfinance strengthens women's decision-making power, contributing to their overall empowerment and sustainable development in rural and urban communities.

**i. Saving with banks**

Table 1.1 provides a quantitative analysis for measure of women's empowerment, highlighting the savings per Self-Help Group (SHG) with banks in real terms. It also shows the percentage ratio of savings per SHG of women to savings per SHG of total in real terms, along with the percentage ratio of savings per SHG of men to savings per SHG of total in real terms. The data offers a comprehensive overview of women's empowerment through microfinance platform, showcasing the impact of savings in driving economic activities and self-employment.

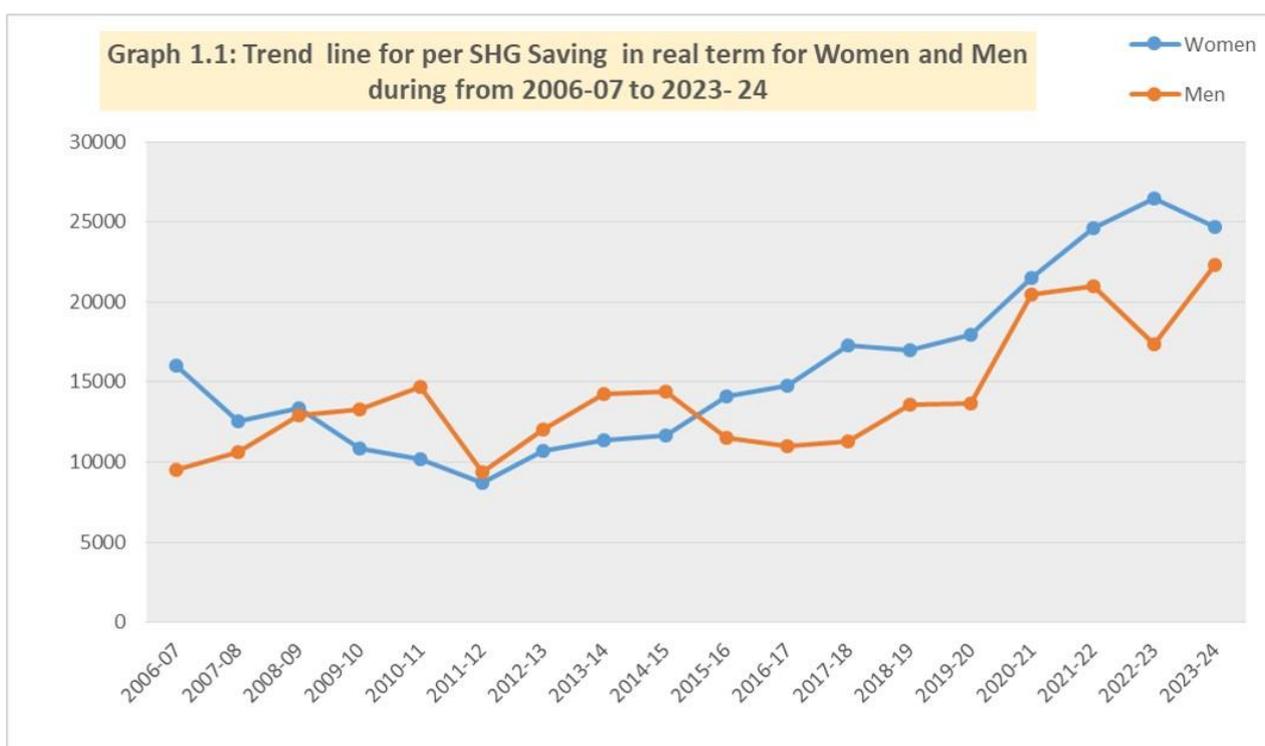
Table 1.1 : The Distribution of Average of Saving with Banks of SHG by Women, Men and Total for during the year ended 31 March in Nominal as well as Real terms															
Year	Rural	Total SHG Nos		All Women SHGs		All Men SHG		Total SHG		All Women SHGs		All Men SHG		% Ratio of per SHG of women to per SHG of Total in real term	% Ratio of per SHG of men to per SHG of Total in real term
	(Base : 2012 = 100 for New CPI )	No. (in lakh)	Amt. (in lakh)	No. (in lakh)	Amt. (in lakh)	No. (in lakh)	Amt. (in lakh)	Per SHG (Rs)	Per SHG in Real term	Per SHG (Rs)	Per SHG in Real term	Per SHG (Rs)	Per SHG in Real term		
2006-07	57.7	41.61	351271	32.71	302498	8.9	48773	8442	14627	9248	16023	5480	9495	109.55	64.91
2007-08	62.1	50.1	378539	39.86	310865	10.24	67674	7556	12163	7799	12555	6609	10639	103.22	87.47
2008-09	68.3	61.21	554562	48.64	443403	12.57	111159	9060	13256	9116	13338	8843	12939	100.62	97.61
2009-10	77.9	69.53	619871	53.1	449866	16.43	170005	8915	11442	8472	10873	10347	13280	95.03	116.06
2010-11	85.7	74.62	701630	60.98	529865	13.64	171765	9403	10977	8689	10144	12593	14701	92.41	133.93
2011-12	92.8	79.6	655141	62.99	510433	16.61	144708	8230	8869	8103	8732	8712	9388	98.46	105.85
2012-13	102.7	73.18	821725	59.38	651486	13.8	170239	11229	10934	10971	10683	12336	12012	97.71	109.86
2013-14	112.6	74.3	989742	62.52	801289	11.78	188453	13321	11835	12817	11387	15998	14213	96.21	120.09
2014-15	119.5	76.97	1105984	66.51	926484	10.46	179500	14369	12025	13930	11658	17161	14361	96.94	119.43
2015-16	126.1	79.03	1369139	67.63	1203578	11.4	165561	17324	13739	17797	14113	14523	11517	102.73	83.83
2016-17	132.4	85.77	1611423	73.22	1428342	12.55	183081	18788	14187	19508	14731	14588	11016	103.83	77.65
2017-18	137.2	87.44	1959212	73.9	1749786	13.54	209426	22406	16331	23678	17258	15467	11273	105.67	69.03
2018-19	141.3	100.14	2332448	85.31	2047355	14.83	285093	23292	16484	23999	16984	19224	13605	103.04	82.54
2019-20	147.3	102.43	2615205	88.32	2332055	14.11	283150	25532	17333	26405	17926	20067	13623	103.42	78.60
2020-21	156.1	112.23	3747761	97.25	3268608	14.98	479153	33394	21392	33610	21531	31986	20491	100.65	95.79
2021-22	164.5	118.93	4724048	104.05	4210477	14.88	513571	39721	24147	40466	24599	34514	20981	101.87	86.89
2022-23	175.8	134.03	5889268	112.92	5245548	21.11	643720	43940	24994	46454	26424	30494	17346	105.72	69.40
2023-24	185.6	144.22	6508915	120.44	5522768	23.78	986147	45132	24321	45855	24711	41470	22348	101.60	91.89
Combined Average								20003	15503	20384	15759	17801	14068	101.65	90.74

Note: No. = Number of SHGs, Amt. = Amount & Source - NABARD: Rural Credit Innovations Department and RBI: CPI



Table 1.1 reveals that the combined average savings of SHG in real terms for women are higher than those for men, with women saving an average of Rs. 15,759 compared to Rs. 14,068 for men during the period from 2006-07 to 2023-24. Similarly, the combined average percentage ratio of savings per SHG of women to the total SHG savings in real terms is also higher than that of men, with women at 101.65% and men at 90.74%. The combined average or mean of saving in real term of women and men are statistically significant at 6% level. This indicates that the women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) benefit more in terms of saving habits, financial awareness, and economic independence. Women in SHGs demonstrate stronger financial management skills, greater awareness about their money, and an increased sense of economic empowerment compared to their male counterparts. It provides them with the opportunity to enhance their empowerment and improve their economic conditions, allowing them to gain greater control over their lives (Galie et al., 2019).

Analyzing year-wise variations, we find that the average savings in real terms for women were consistently higher than those for men in 2006-07, with women saving Rs. 16,023 compared to Rs. 9,495 for men. A similar result appears in the following two years. However, women's savings per Self-Help Group (SHG) in real terms have consistently been higher than men from 2015-16 to 2023-24. Women's savings per SHG ranged from Rs. 14,113 in 2015-16 to Rs. 24,711 in 2023-24, whereas men's savings per SHG varied from Rs.11517 in 2015-16 to Rs. 22,348 in 2023-24. This indicates that women have demonstrated greater financial strength in terms of savings compared to men, highlighting their stronger position based on the savings indicator over the years. As observed in Graph 1.1, women's savings in real terms have steadily increased from 2011-12 to 2022-23, rising from Rs. 8,732 in 2011-12 to Rs. 26,424 in 2022-23. In contrast, men's savings performance has shown a more fluctuating pattern over the years. This trend highlights women's stronger and more consistent saving habits, reinforcing their financial stability and economic empowerment through self-help group initiatives.





ii. Access to credit by SHGs (or loan disbursed to SHG by bank)

Access to credit refers to the ability of individuals, businesses, or organizations to obtain loans from banks or financial institutions for various purposes like personal needs or business expansion. Eligibility is based on factors such as credit history, income level, collateral (e.g. SHG) and repayment capacity. Government policies, such as financial inclusion, also play a crucial role by ensuring marginalized or low-income groups have access to credit. These policies aim to improve financial access for all, enabling economic empowerment, economic growth and supporting those who might otherwise be excluded from financial systems.

Table 1.2 : The Distribution of Average of Loan Disbursed to SHG by Women, Men and Total during the year in Nominal as well as Real terms

Year	Rural	Total SHG Nos		All Women SHGs		All Men SHG		Total SHG		All Women SHGs		All Men SHG		% Ratio of per SHG of women to per SHG of Total in real term	% Ratio of per SHG of men to per SHG of Total in real term
	(Base : 2012 = 100 for New CPI)	No. (in lakh)	Amt. (in lakh)	No. (in lakh)	Amt. (in lakh)	No. (in lakh)	Amt. (in lakh)	Per SHG (Rs)	Per SHG in Real term	Per SHG (Rs)	Per SHG in Real term	Per SHG (Rs)	Per SHG in Real term		
2006-07	57.7	11.06	657039	9.58	567736	1.48	89303	59407	102931	59263	102681	60340	104548	99.76	101.57
2007-08	62.1	12.28	884926	10.41	747426	1.87	137500	72062	116005	71799	115581	73529	118367	99.63	102.04
2008-09	68.3	16.1	1225351	13.75	1052738	2.35	172613	76109	111356	76563	112021	73452	107470	100.60	96.51
2009-10	77.9	15.87	1445330	12.94	1242937	2.93	202393	91073	116887	96054	123279	69076	88655	105.47	75.85
2010-11	85.7	11.96	1454773	10.17	1262233	1.79	192540	121637	141997	124113	144888	107564	125569	102.04	88.43
2011-12	92.8	11.48	1653477	9.23	1413202	2.25	240275	144031	155206	153110	164989	106789	115074	106.30	74.14
2012-13	102.7	12.2	2058536	10.37	1785431	1.83	273105	168732	164296	172173	167646	149238	145314	102.04	88.45
2013-14	112.6	13.66	2401736	11.52	2103797	2.14	297939	175823	156206	182621	162246	139224	123690	103.87	79.18
2014-15	119.5	16.26	2758231	14.48	2441975	1.78	316256	169633	141962	168645	141135	177672	148690	99.42	104.74
2015-16	126.1	18.32	3728690	16.29	3441142	2.03	287548	203531	161405	211243	167520	141649	112331	103.79	69.60
2016-17	132.4	18.98	3878116	17.16	3610313	1.82	267803	204326	154296	210391	158876	147145	111115	102.97	72.01
2017-18	137.2	22.61	4718588	20.75	4455874	1.86	262714	208695	152110	214741	156517	141244	102948	102.90	67.68
2018-19	141.3	26.98	5831763	23.65	5325404	3.33	506359	216151	152973	225176	159360	152060	107615	104.17	70.35
2019-20	147.3	31.46	7765935	28.84	7329756	2.62	436179	246851	167584	254152	172541	166481	113021	102.96	67.44
2020-21	156.1	28.87	5807068	25.9	5442313	2.97	364755	201145	128857	210128	134611	122813	78676	104.47	61.06
2021-22	164.5	33.98	9972922	31.5	9381721	2.48	591201	293494	178416	297832	181053	238388	144916	101.48	81.22
2022-23	175.8	42.96	14520023	41.42	13931569	1.54	588454	337989	192258	336349	191325	382113	217357	99.51	113.05
2023-24	185.6	54.82	20928587	53.2	20271608	1.62	656979	381769	205732	381045	205341	405543	218543	99.81	106.23
Combined Average								187359	150026	191411	153423	158573	126883	102.26	84.57

Note: No. = Number of SHGs, Amt. = Amount & Source - NABARD: Rural Credit Innovations Department and RBI: CPI

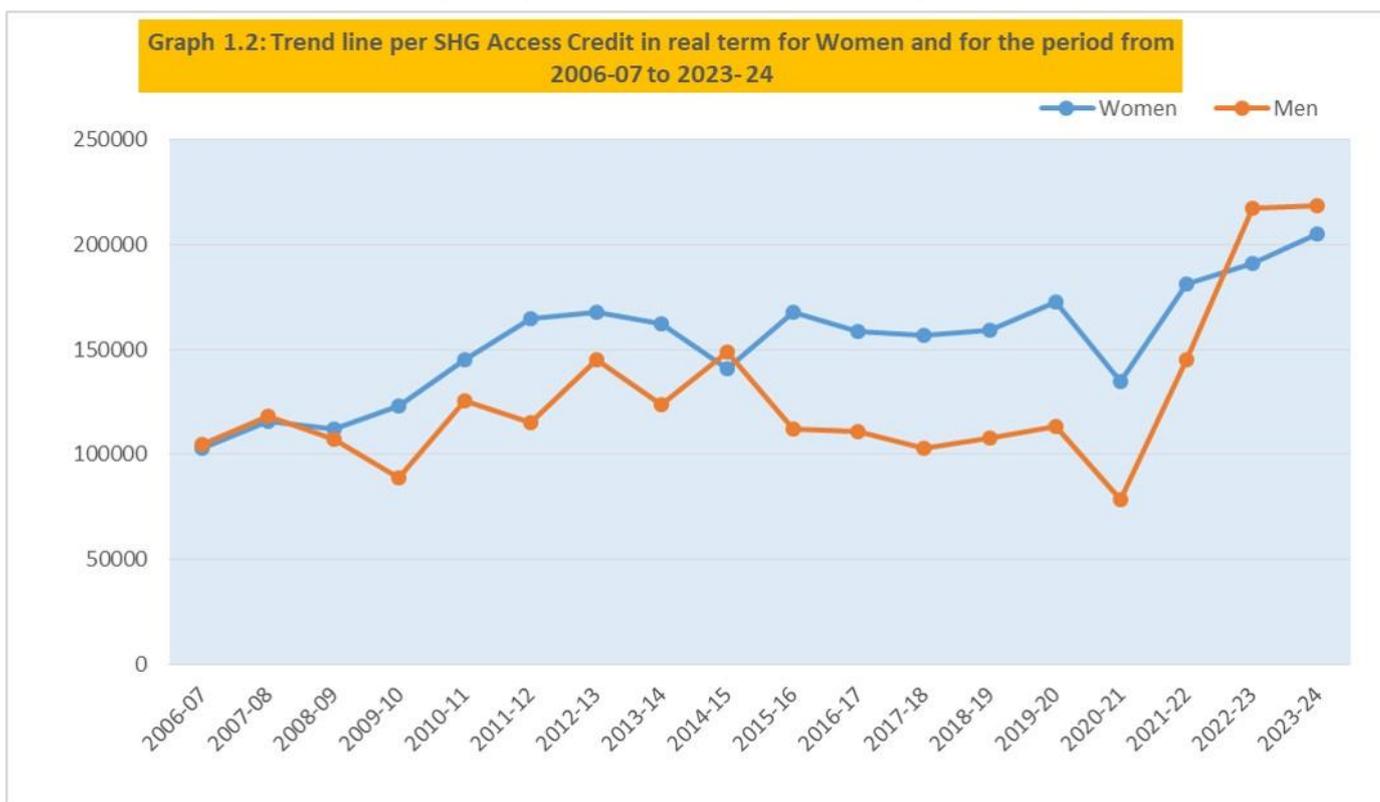
The second key indicator of women's financial empowerment is their access to credit, specifically through Self-Help Groups. One way to measure this is by analyzing the loan disbursed to SHGs by banks. Table 1.2 presents the distribution of the average loan disbursed to women, men and total SHGs in both nominal and real terms. The data reveals that, over the years, the average access to credit in real terms for women is higher than that for men and even exceeds the overall average. The real-term values stand at Rs. 153423 for women, Rs. 126883 for men and Rs.150026 in total. We have estimated that the difference of mean for women and men are statistically significant at 1% level.

Additionally, the percentage ratio of loan access per SHG of women to per SHG total is also greater than that of men. The figures show 102.26% for women SHGs compared to 84.57% for men SHGs. This indicates that



women SHGs have better access to credit, enhancing their ability to make financial decisions regarding their businesses and economic activities. As a result, women experience greater economic empowerment and financial independence. These findings highlight the positive role of SHGs in strengthening women's financial inclusion, ultimately leading to improved economic self-sufficiency and decision-making power. Microfinance empowers women by enhancing their access to credit, healthcare, and education while also fostering social capital, promoting entrepreneurship, and reducing poverty (Khandker, 2005; Westover, 2008).

Graph 1.2 clearly shows that the trend line of women's SHGs in real terms remains above that of men's SHGs up to the year 2022-23. This suggests that women's SHGs are more successful in managing microfinance loans than their male counterparts. The higher loan amounts in real term reflect the greater economic empowerment women experience through these initiatives. Women's limited access to credit facilities has been a significant barrier to their self-employment, highlighting the need for various development strategies and tools—such as microfinancing, education, training, and entrepreneurial programs—to address this gap (Clement et al., 2019). Among these, microfinancing is regarded as one of the most effective tools for both poverty alleviation and women's empowerment (Schuler et al., 1996).



### iii. Repayment performance or Less Outstanding amount

In this section we examine the third indicator for women's empowerment is known as repayment performance or less outstanding amount. Good repayment performance benefits both borrowers and lenders, ensuring financial sustainability and access to future credit. There are different measures to improve loan repayment performance: financial education and awareness programs, flexible repayment schedules, monitoring and timely intervention by lenders and encouraging income-generating activities for borrowers.



All these facilities are covered by microfinance institutes.

Table 1.3 shows the distribution of the average outstanding loan for SHGs by women, men, and the total for the year ending 31 March, presented in both nominal and real terms. The repayment performance of SHGs depends on the access to credit and the outstanding loan amount during a specific year, which cannot be evaluated in absolute terms or per SHG in real term. To better assess repayment performance, it is necessary to calculate the percentage of outstanding loans. This is done by dividing the total outstanding loan amount by the total credit amount in real terms and then multiplying by 100. The estimated percentage values are provided in the last two columns of Table 1.3.

Year	Rural	Total SHG Nos		All Women SHGs		All Men SHG		Total SHG		All Women SHGs		All Men SHG		% of outstanding for Women	% outstanding for Male
	(Base : 2012 = 100 for New CPI)	No. (in lakh)	Amt. (in lakh)	No. (in lakh)	Amt. (in lakh)	No. (in lakh)	Amt. (in lakh)	Per SHG (Rs)	Per SHG in Real term	Per SHG (Rs)	Per SHG in Real term	Per SHG (Rs)	Per SHG in Real term		
2006-07	57.7	28.95	1236649	23.89	1013739	5.06	222910	42717	74013	42434	73522	44053	76329	71.60	73.01
2007-08	62.1	36.26	1699910	29.17	1333561	7.09	366349	46881	75469	45717	73595	51671	83180	63.67	70.27
2008-09	68.3	42.24	2267984	32.77	1858354	9.47	409630	53693	78559	56709	82972	43256	63288	74.07	58.89
2009-10	77.9	48.51	2803828	38.98	2303036	9.53	500792	57799	74182	59083	75829	52549	67444	61.51	76.07
2010-11	85.7	47.87	3122117	39.84	2612375	8.03	509742	65221	76138	65572	76547	63480	74105	52.83	59.02
2011-12	92.8	43.54	3634000	36.49	3046528	7.05	587472	83463	89939	83489	89967	83329	89795	54.53	78.03
2012-13	102.7	44.51	3937530	37.57	3284004	6.94	653526	88464	86138	87410	85112	94168	91692	50.77	63.10
2013-14	112.6	41.97	4292752	34.06	3615158	7.91	677594	102281	90870	106141	94299	85663	76105	58.12	61.53
2014-15	119.5	44.68	5154546	38.58	4590100	6.1	564446	115366	96547	118976	99569	92532	77438	70.55	52.08
2015-16	126.1	46.73	5711923	40.36	5142891	6.37	569032	122232	96933	127425	101051	89330	70841	60.32	63.06
2016-17	132.4	48.48	6158130	42.84	5644424	5.64	513706	127024	95922	131756	99495	91083	68781	62.62	61.90
2017-18	137.2	50.2	7559845	45.49	7040173	4.71	519672	150595	109763	154763	112801	110334	80418	72.07	78.12
2018-19	141.3	50.77	8709815	44.61	7923198	6.16	786617	171554	121411	177610	125697	127698	90373	78.88	83.98
2019-20	147.3	56.77	10807507	51.12	10062071	5.65	745436	190374	129242	196832	133627	131936	89569	77.45	79.25
2020-21	156.1	57.8	10328971	53.11	9659660	4.69	669311	178702	114479	181880	116515	142710	91422	86.56	116.20
2021-22	164.5	67.4	15105130	62.65	14228861	4.75	876269	224112	136238	227117	138065	184478	112144	76.26	77.39
2022-23	175.8	69.57	18807880	65.15	17946842	4.42	861038	270345	153780	275470	156695	194805	110811	81.90	50.98
2023-24	185.6	77.42	25966730	72.29	24689532	5.13	1277198	335401	180744	341535	184050	248966	134166	89.63	61.39
Combined Average								134790	104465	137773	106634	107336	85995	69.50	70.24

Note: No. = Number of SHGs, Amt. = Amount & Source - NABARD: Rural Credit Innovations Department and RBI: CPI

The combined average percentage of outstanding loans over the years is 69.50% for women, slightly lower than 70.24% for men, indicating better repayment performance among women. As seen in Graph 1.3, the trend line for women's percentage outstanding remains below that of men until 2021-22, except for the two years 2022-23 and 2023-24, where it surpasses men's. This suggests that women's SHGs generally exhibit stronger loan repayment patterns compared to their male counterparts. Microfinance programs focused on empowerment primarily target women, as they are often seen as more trustworthy and have a greater social impact (Tsiboe et al., 2018). These benefits are evident in the loan repayment rates, with female borrowers typically demonstrating better repayment histories than their male counterparts (Rosenberg et al., 2009).



Graph 1.3: Trend line for percentage of Outstanding for Women and Men for the period from 2006-07 to 2023-24



When women gain access to financial resources through microfinance programs, they become economically empowered, which has far-reaching effects. An economically empowered woman is more likely to take important decisions regarding her family, such as investing in her children's education, improving their healthcare, and addressing other vital household needs. By taking control of household finances, women improve the well-being of their families and contribute to the broader economic development of their communities.

**Summary and conclusion:** Over an eighteen-year period, spanning from 2006-07 to 2023-24, this study examines women's empowerment through microfinance with a focus on economic empowerment which is a crucial dimension of overall empowerment. The research measures progress using three key indicators: savings held in banks, access to credit, and repayment performance. Each indicator is evaluated in real terms, considering the performance per Self Help Group. By assessing these variables, the study highlights the role of financial services in enhancing women's autonomy, enabling them to secure financial stability and make informed decisions. This approach provides insights into the impact of microfinance on women's economic empowerment.

Access to credit is vital for economic empowerment, particularly for women, as it allows them to engage in business and improve their financial independence. Self-Help Groups play a key role in enhancing women's access to credit, with loan disbursement figures showing that women's SHGs receive higher average loans (Rs. 153423) in real terms compared to men's (Rs. 126883). The findings highlight the importance of SHGs in fostering women's financial inclusion and empowerment. By enhancing access to credit, SHGs allow women to manage businesses and make decisions that contribute to their economic independence. The success of



women’s SHGs in securing larger loans in real terms suggests that microfinance is a powerful tool for poverty alleviation and women’s empowerment. Continued support for women-focused microfinance initiatives is essential for reducing barriers to self-employment and promoting long-term economic growth and equality.

**Table 1.4: Statistical tools for mean difference to test for per SHG of Women and per SHG of Men in real term**

	Variable	Mean	Mean diff.	t-value	level of significance
Saving of SHG	Per SHG of Women	15759.44	1691.222	1.9616	6%
	Per SHG of men	14068.22			
Loan disbursed to SHG	Per SHG of Women	153423	26539.51	4.0465	1%
	Per SHG of men	126883			

Repayment performance is a crucial indicator of women’s empowerment, as it ensures both financial sustainability for lenders and continued access to credit for borrowers. Microfinance institutions provide various measures to improve repayment, including financial education, flexible schedules, and income-generating support. Women’s average outstanding loan percentage is 69.50%, slightly lower than men’s 70.24%, indicating marginally better repayment performance among women. Women’s SHGs demonstrate better loan repayment performance, which is linked to their economic empowerment through microfinance programs. Empowered women are more likely to make positive financial decisions, improving their families’ well-being and contributing to community development. Continued support for women-focused microfinance programs is essential for sustaining these positive outcomes.

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## Women's Contribution to Indian Agriculture through Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Practices, and Impact on Sustainable Rural Development

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### Abstract

Women have been the epicentre of Indian agriculture, not only in food production but also in biodiversity and local ecosystem conservation. This paper explores the critical role women play in agriculture through indigenous knowledge systems-on their practice, challenge, and how they influence sustainable rural development. Women have traditionally been the backbone of agriculture, utilizing traditional knowledge to enhance productivity, preserve natural resources, and maintain ecological balance. Their contributions from seed preservation, organic farming, water management, and intergenerational wisdom, all of which are very significant to sustainability. Still, women have many problems, including access to resources, education, and decision-making, though they play a very significant role. In this paper, recognition and mainstreaming of women's indigenous knowledge towards sustainable agricultural development is highlighted. It also calls for policy interventions that will empower women, provide them with better access to resources, and strengthen their participation in agricultural decision making. Through the utilization of skills and practices of women, India can develop more resilient, eco-friendly, and sustainable agricultural systems. The paper concludes by recommending that the policymakers support the contributions of women in the sense that their knowledge and practices will be preserved and used for the benefit of the rural communities and the environment.

**Keywords:** *women, Indian agriculture, indigenous knowledge, rural development, sustainability.*

### Introduction:

Women form an important section for India's agricultural economy. Contributions by women make a big chunk in this entire agrarian scenario. It commences with seeding to harvesting followed by post harvesting. Women still do not get appreciated. Generational transfer of indigenous knowledge systems between women are more significant in preserving agriculture sustainably. This concerns seed preservation,



management of soil fertility, water and all the conventional practices. Based on these issues, the author examines women contributions, indigenous knowledge systems, their impact on rural developments.

## Objectives

1. To critically assess the multi-dimensional contribution of women to Indian agriculture and their various roles in the value chain of agricultural production—from cultivating crops, maintaining livestock to post-harvest processing, as well as preserving seeds—and establishing their economic as well as environmental importance.
2. To examine the contribution of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) held and passed on by women, including how indigenous practices like organic farming, natural pest control, water conservation, and crop diversification help achieve sustainable agricultural productivity and rural ecosystem resilience.
3. To evaluate the contribution of women's farming practices and traditional knowledge towards sustainable rural development, including their effects on food security, environmental protection, community empowerment, and attainment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
4. To determine the issues and constraints for women in agriculture, including their limited access to land, credit, technology, and decision-making, and assess the impact of institutional interventions and policy actions designed to empower women farmers.
5. To develop practical recommendations on mainstreaming women's indigenous knowledge and increasing their involvement in agricultural decision-making in order to achieve more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable rural communities.
6. To examine loopholes in women in agriculture policies and provide recommendations that should be implemented.

## Methodology

### 1. Literature Review Approach

The research employs an integrated literature review approach, systematically gathering and analysing prior research, reports, and case studies on women's contributions in Indian agriculture and indigenous knowledge systems.

### 2. Thematic Analysis

Syntheses of key themes are drawn from the literature, including:

- Women's contributions in agricultural production and post-harvesting work
- Indigenous knowledge practices for soil, water, and pest management
- Socio-economic and environmental effects of women's farm work



- Policy and institutional arrangements favouring women in agriculture

### 3. Case Study Analysis

The analysis includes case studies across different parts of India, for example, organic farming by women in Andhra Pradesh, to demonstrate the applied use and effects of indigenous knowledge and women's leadership in agriculture.

### 4. Comparative Analysis

The report compares indigenous and contemporary farming methods, assessing the efficacy and sustainability of traditional techniques in comparison with modern methods, focusing on climate resilience and rural incomes.

### 5. Policy and Program Evaluation

The review determines the effectiveness of government and non-government programs (such as Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana) in empowering women, facilitating access to resources, and enhancing capacity development in agriculture.

### 6. Synthesis and Recommendations

Literature and case study findings are synthesized to make conclusions and recommend policy, practice, and research, highlighting the importance of recognizing, conserving, and upscaling women's indigenous knowledge for sustainable rural development.

This systematic approach guarantees a comprehensive understanding of the topic, offering evidence-based information and practical recommendations for agriculture and rural development stakeholders.

## Women's Contribution to Indian Agriculture

Women in India play a pivotal role in nearly all stages of agricultural production, contributing significantly to the country's agrarian economy. Their involvement begins with crop cultivation, where they participate in activities such as planting, weeding, and harvesting (Vikaspedia, n.d.). These tasks demand considerable physical effort and skill, highlighting their essential contribution to food production. In addition to cultivating crops, women are deeply engaged in livestock management. They rear animals, manage fodder supplies, and oversee milk production, ensuring the smooth functioning of rural households and local economies dependent on dairy farming (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2011; National Sample Survey Office [NSSO], 2019; Agarwal, 1994).

Post-harvest processing is another critical area where women's efforts are invaluable. They are responsible for grain drying, milling, and storage, which are essential for maintaining the quality and longevity of agricultural produce. Furthermore, women play a key role in seed preservation, using traditional techniques to safeguard seeds for future planting. This practice not only supports the sustainability of crop cycles but also contributes to biodiversity and food security (World Bank, 2020).



Despite their significant contributions, women in agriculture face numerous challenges. Limited land ownership restricts their decision-making power and financial independence. Wage disparities and unequal access to resources further exacerbate their struggles. However, women's use of indigenous methods, such as applying cow dung as organic manure or using turmeric as a natural pesticide, reflects their knowledge of sustainable farming. Moreover, their ability to adapt these techniques in response to changing climatic conditions demonstrates their resilience and innovation in the face of adversity.

Women's contributions to agriculture, though often underrecognized, are foundational to the sector's productivity and sustainability (Kumar & Singh, 2020). Addressing the barriers, they face and empowering them with equitable access to resources and opportunities will strengthen rural livelihoods and foster more inclusive agricultural growth.

### Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)

Indigenous Knowledge Systems, or IKS, refers to the local and traditional knowledge which has been cultivated and refined for generations of human beings. In agriculture, the custodians of IKS are predominantly women, whose preservation and implementation of sustainable agriculture leads to significant positive impacts on farm productivity and rural ecosystem resilience (Sharma, Verma & Gupta, 2021). Their activities encompass the entire gamut of work done in improving agricultural productivity as well as the sustenance of ecological balance in a rural economy.

One significant area where women apply IKS is in soil and water conservation. Techniques such as contour farming and bund-making are commonly practiced preventing soil erosion and enhance land productivity. Additionally, traditional irrigation systems, designed to optimize the use of available water resources, reflect a deep understanding of local hydrological patterns. Women's expertise in managing these systems ensures efficient water use, which is particularly crucial in regions facing water scarcity and erratic rainfall (Altieri, 2004; Deccan Development Society [DDS], 2018).

Pest management is another domain where women's indigenous knowledge shines. They prepare and apply natural pesticides using bioresources like neem leaves, turmeric, and cow urine. These organic solutions are not only environment friendly but also reduce dependence on chemical inputs, promoting healthier soil and crops. By relying on locally available materials, women farmers contribute to sustainable pest control practices that align with the principles of agroecology.

Crop diversification is a vital strategy that women implement to mitigate risks and improve yields. Practices like intercropping and mixed cropping enable farmers to grow multiple crops on the same piece of land, enhancing soil fertility, optimizing resource use, and reducing the vulnerability of crops to pests and diseases. This diversity also contributes to dietary variety and nutritional security within rural households, underscoring the holistic benefits of traditional farming systems.

Women are also the stewards of seed selection and storage, employing indigenous methods to ensure seed quality and longevity. Techniques such as storing seeds in ash, neem leaves, or earthen pots protect them from pests and fungal infections, safeguarding the next planting cycle. In states like Andhra Pradesh, where organic farming initiatives have gained momentum, women-led movements have demonstrated the transformative potential of grassroots agricultural innovations. These efforts have enhanced rural livelihoods and created models of sustainable farming that inspire broader agricultural reforms.



These traditional practices have relevance beyond local economies, as they are directly linked to global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The continued use and promotion of IKS support goals related to zero hunger, sustainable agriculture, responsible consumption, and climate action. It is important to recognize the role of women in preserving and advancing indigenous agricultural knowledge to frame inclusive, sustainable agricultural policies that respect cultural heritage while addressing modern environmental challenges (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2019).

### Sustainable Rural Development

Contributions of women, which are deeply intertwined with IKS, are integral in fostering sustainability in rural areas. Their roles in agricultural production, resource management, and sustainable practices drive significant positive impacts in the economic, environmental, and social spheres (Patel & Joshi, 2021). Recognizing and supporting their efforts is crucial for holistic rural development and sustainable growth (National Gender Resource Centre in Agriculture [NGRCA], 2020).

This means one of the significant contributions that women make to rural economic growth is through IKS. The role of women's labour in agriculture – from planting and harvesting, livestock management, to post-harvest processing, remains at the centre of the food systems. It provides for household and community food security while adding to productivity and decreasing costs through their traditional practices. For instance, experience in seed banking and pest management reduces dependence upon costly commercial inputs, thereby contributing to higher net returns. In local economies, with women-led initiatives in organic farming, such as in Andhra Pradesh, that focus on long-term sustainable methods reinvigorate such economies. Indeed, women, through stable organically produced supplies and market diversity that increases rural earnings and employment potential, strengthen such rural economies.

In addition to economic benefits, women's adoption and preservation of eco-friendly agricultural practices contribute significantly to environmental conservation (Rani & Verma, 2022). Techniques like natural pest management, organic composting, and water conservation help maintain soil health, reduce pollution, and protect biodiversity. By mitigating the adverse effects of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, these methods promote long-term agricultural sustainability. Adaptive strategies that help reduce climate vulnerability include women's innovative responses to climate challenges such as adjusting crop cycles or enhancing drought resilience through mixed cropping. By such efforts, women are at the forefront of efforts to combat the environmental threats facing rural areas and contribute to more general climate action goals (NITI Aayog, 2022).

Social empowerment is another impact that women's involvement in IKS-driven agricultural practices has on their lives (Desai & Gupta, 2022). Their leadership in farming initiatives fosters stronger community ties and cultivates knowledge-sharing networks among women. Participation in self-help groups, cooperative societies, and local governance bodies amplifies their voices in decision-making processes (Press Information Bureau, 2023). By acting as custodians of traditional knowledge and sustainable farming, women inspire younger generations and other women in the community, creating a ripple effect of empowerment. This



active engagement strengthens gender equity in the rural areas, community cohesion, and resilience in social and economic challenges.

### Gender Equality for Sustainable Development

Institutions, such as government bodies, NGOs, and local organizations, play an important role in promoting fairness between men and women in agriculture. Women make significant contributions to farming in India, especially through traditional practices passed down for generations (United Nations India, 2023). However, their work often goes unrecognized. Ensuring that women have equal access to resources and opportunities is crucial for sustainable development in rural areas (UN Women, 2013).

Women in rural India are involved in several key agricultural activities, including selecting seeds, managing pests naturally, maintaining soil fertility, and storing food after harvest. Despite their efforts, they face barriers such as limited access to land, credit, and farming tools. Institutions must work to acknowledge their contributions and ensure they have equal opportunities to participate in farming activities (SMS Foundation, 2023). Government programs like the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) aim to empower women farmers by providing training and resources, but more focused efforts are needed to implement such programs effectively, especially in remote areas (Sharma & Bansal, 2021).

One of the ways institutions can help is by organizing training programs to build women's skills in sustainable agriculture. These sessions can teach them about organic farming, composting, water-saving techniques, and crop diversification. Along with this, institutions must ensure that women have fair access to land, loans, and farming inputs. Joint land ownership between men and women, as well as loans designed specifically for women farmers, can go a long way in addressing these challenges (UN Women, 2013).

Another important role of institutions is to preserve and promote the traditional knowledge women possess. This knowledge, which includes natural pest control and crop rotation methods, has been proven to benefit the environment and boost sustainability. Collaborations with universities and research organizations can integrate this knowledge into modern agricultural practices (Ugboma, 2014). Institutions can also create platforms for women to share their ideas, influence policies, and connect with other farmers. Women-led cooperatives and self-help groups are examples of how women can thrive when given the right support (SMS Foundation, 2023).

It is also important for institutions to monitor and evaluate the impact of women's contributions to sustainable rural development. By measuring outcomes like improved food production, environmental benefits, and income stability, institutions can better understand how women's roles in agriculture strengthen rural communities.

### Women's Contribution to Indian Agriculture Using Traditional Knowledge

Women's traditional knowledge in agriculture is a cornerstone of rural development. For instance, women often select seeds based on their understanding of soil conditions and climate, ensuring better crop growth (Jayasheela, 2015). They use natural methods to improve soil health, such as compost and animal manure, and employ safe techniques like neem leaves and ash for pest control. Women are also skilled in conserving



water through practices like mulching and traditional irrigation methods. Additionally, they grow a variety of crops together, which helps maintain soil health and reduces risks.

These practices have a significant impact on rural development. Organic farming and crop diversity help protect the environment by reducing pollution and conserving biodiversity. Women also contribute to income generation by engaging in farming, processing crops, and selling their produce. Their work strengthens community resilience by improving food security and preparing for natural disasters. Furthermore, when women are empowered to lead farming initiatives or join groups, it boosts their confidence and encourages social growth (UN Women, 2013).

However, women face several challenges in agriculture. Many do not have access to land or decision-making power, which limits their ability to grow. They also struggle to obtain loans, modern farming equipment, and training. Social norms often restrict their involvement in leadership roles, and their voices are underrepresented in policymaking (SMS Foundation, 2023).

Institutions can address these issues by ensuring women have equal rights to land and resources. Tailored training programs and gender-sensitive credit schemes can help bridge the gaps. Supporting women-led groups and protecting traditional knowledge will also contribute to their empowerment. Raising awareness about the importance of gender equality in agriculture is vital to creating long-lasting change (Ugboma, 2014).

### Issues Facing Women in Agriculture

Despite their strong contributions to agriculture and rural development, women have many challenges limiting their potential and impact (Mehta, 2020). They are deeply entrenched in social norms, systemic inequalities, and gaps in policy frameworks, which do not adequately address specific gender needs. It is crucial to identify and break these barriers for the full realization of the benefits that women's work in agriculture and IKS holds.

Perhaps one of the most constant challenges is women's lack of recognition for labour and expertise in agriculture. Indeed, traditional gender roles and social norms in many rural societies override contributions from women in such areas to be relegated in the informal sectors of the economy and unaccounted for. Although women do most of the labour-intensive work, including planting, weeding, harvesting, and post-harvest processing, their work is often considered an extension of household chores rather than a formal economic activity. This lack of recognition excludes women from decision-making at the household, community, and policy-making levels, which undermines their authority and ability to advocate for their needs and rights.

Access to resources is another important challenge that discriminates against women in agriculture. Most women are deprived of access to modern agricultural technology, which can significantly increase productivity and reduce the labour burden. Moreover, there are considerable hindrances to the access of credit and financing by women due to the absence of land ownership, which most often is needed as collateral. The lack of enough capital makes women unable to spend on better seeds, tools, or irrigation systems. Similarly, training facilities and farm extension services remain inaccessible to women, missing technical imperatives meant for farm practices improvement or the adoption of innovative improvements. These inequalities are affecting resource provision access in perpetuating cycles of poverty in rural settings.



Policy gaps continue to worsen the plight of women in agriculture production. Most policies drawn to guide agricultural sectors are gender-discriminative in nature. This implies that they overlook all unique challenges women face during these periods. Policies for instance on land reforms and subsidy distribution fail to apply thought to consider the structural barrier that prevents women from owning some portions of land or accessing governments in distributive benefits (Down To Earth, 2023). There are insufficient investments in programs specially tailored for the promotion of women farmers, for instance targeted training, gender-responsive credit schemes, and women-led cooperatives, for the most part. This denies inclusiveness in the policy design and implementation aspects of the development efforts, which can go on to demote gender in rural economies.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes recognizing women's contributions to agriculture, improving their access to resources, and implementing gender-sensitive policies (Nair & Rao, 2023). Ensuring that women have equitable rights to land, credit, technology, and education will enhance their productivity and economic independence. Moreover, integrating gender perspectives into agricultural policy frameworks will create a more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable agricultural sector. Empowering women is not only a matter of social justice but also a crucial step toward achieving broader developmental goals and food security (Ministry of Women and Child Development [MWCD], 2016).

## Loopholes in Policies Concerning Women in Agriculture and Proposed Improvements

### 1. Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP)

Goal: Strengthen women farmers by enhancing their access to inputs, skills, and sustainable farming practices.

Alignment: Aligns directly with women-led activities in organic farming and indigenous methods, although gaps in implementation occur in far-flung regions.

Loopholes:

- Limited coverage in tribal and far-off areas.
- Training modules tend to be generic, failing to include local or indigenous knowledge.

Evidence:

Shroffs Foundation Trust's assessment report indicates the necessity for locally adapted social innovation strategies (Banerjee, Kumar, Shakil, Dukpa, Rai, & Mrinal, 2017)

Improvement Suggestions:

- Create localized mobile outreach units with area-specific training in IKS.
- Develop region-specific modules dealing with local climate problems and indigenous practices.

### 2. National Policy for Farmers (2007)



Purpose: Enhance the economic feasibility of farming using gender-inclusive methods.

Alignment: Identifies women's contributions to agriculture and recommends support measures, although not fully implemented on the ground.

Loopholes:

- Weak enforcement mechanisms in an outdated framework.
- Wide provisions without specific measures for women's empowerment.

Evidence:

Policy focuses on gender mainstreaming but is not supported by action programs. (Department of Agriculture & Cooperation, 2007)

Improvement Suggestions:

- Insert mandatory gender-responsive budgeting into the policy.
- Form a Women Farmers' Task Force to provide constant input and integration of traditional practices.

### 3. Integrated Watershed Management Programme (IWMP)

Objective: Encourage soil and water conservation with community involvement.

Alignment: Provides scope for integrating women's traditional water management methods into national planning.

Loopholes:

- The participation of women is usually confined to nominal posts.
- Engineering-based approach with lesser focus on traditional practices.

Evidence:

Top-down approach has resulted in under-employment of traditional knowledge and very little empowerment of women. (Sreedevi, Wani, & Nageswara Rao, 2007).

Suggestions for Improvement:

- Engage women in the community water planning boards.
- Address traditional water harvesting practices in norms of planning.

### 4. Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY)

Goal: Ensure complete development of agriculture and allied industries.

Alignment: Can be used to promote women's organic and sustainable farming practices.



Loopholes:

- Does not have a gender-sensitive fund allocation framework.
- Project proposals tend to circumvent women's needs or involvement.

Evidence:

Scheme encourages states but does not have special provisions for women. (Department of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, n.d.)

Suggestions for Improvement:

- Allocate a minimum quota of funds for women-led projects.
- Mandate gender impact assessment prior to state-level project approval.

## 5. Digital India & PMGDISHA

Objective: Foster digital literacy in rural India.

Alignment: Contributes to goals of training women in agri-tech tools for e-marketing and information access.

Loopholes:

- Low coverage of rural women owing to mobility, awareness, and digital divide.
- Absence of agriculture-related content and e-services.

Evidence:

Digital tools fail to be effectively customized for women farmers. (Press Information Bureau, 2021)

Improvement Suggestions:

- Create women-centric digital agriculture courses with regional language content.
- Train local women as digital mentees for SHGs and farming groups.

## 6. Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana - NRLM

Target: Poverty reduction through skill development and livelihood promotion.

Alignment: Women-led SHGs are of priority for co-op building and disseminating IKS.

Loopholes:

- Greater concentration on earning generation activities and lesser on agriculture that is sustainable.
- In indigenous knowledge, the core agenda has no incorporation.



Evidence:

Great mobilization of rural homes but greater agro focus should be included. (Ministry of Rural Development, 2025)

Improvement Suggestions:

- Map out IKS training modules with livelihood groups among rural women.
- Arrangement of partnering academic institutions towards ecological farming inputs.

## Conclusion

Women's indigenous knowledge and traditional practices are vital for advancing sustainable agriculture and rural development. Their expertise in soil conservation, water management, seed preservation, and organic farming methods not only enhances agricultural productivity but also promotes environmental stewardship. However, the potential of women in agriculture remains underutilized due to systemic barriers and policy gaps. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive, gender-sensitive policy measures that prioritize equity, resource access, and the integration of indigenous knowledge into contemporary agricultural strategies.

A critical policy priority is the promotion of gender equity in land ownership and wages. Land is a fundamental asset in agriculture, yet women often face discriminatory inheritance laws and cultural norms that limit their ability to own or control land. Policies that ensure women's legal rights to land, along with enforcement mechanisms to uphold these rights, are essential for empowering women economically and enhancing their decision-making power. In addition, wage disparities in agricultural labour must be addressed through regulations that guarantee equal pay for equal work, recognizing women's contributions as economically valuable rather than supplementary to male labour.

Providing women with equitable access to resources such as modern agricultural technology, financial services, and specialized training is another crucial policy objective. Many women farmers lack the tools, credit, and knowledge necessary to adopt advanced farming techniques that could boost productivity and reduce labour intensity. Gender-responsive agricultural extension programs can bridge this gap by tailoring training sessions to women's schedules, literacy levels, and specific needs. Access to affordable credit and microfinance schemes without stringent collateral requirements, combined with initiatives to improve women's digital and technological literacy, would further enhance their capacity to innovate and thrive in agriculture.

Equally important is the documentation and integration of indigenous knowledge into modern agricultural practices. Women's traditional methods of natural pest management, seed preservation, and climate adaptation have been refined over generations and provide sustainable, eco-friendly alternatives to industrial farming techniques. Policymakers must invest in research and knowledge-sharing platforms to capture these practices, ensuring that they are preserved, validated, and disseminated widely. Collaborative approaches that blend indigenous wisdom with scientific advancements can create resilient agricultural systems that are both productive and sustainable. Recognizing women as knowledge holders and involving



them in research, policy design, and implementation will further strengthen agricultural innovation and rural development.

In conclusion, empowering women through policies that promote land and wage equity, resource access, and the integration of indigenous knowledge is key to building sustainable and inclusive agricultural systems. Gender-sensitive reforms not only benefit women but also enhance food security, environmental health, and economic resilience. Policymakers must prioritize these measures to harness the full potential of women as leaders and innovators in agriculture.

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## Democracy Under Heat: Transforming Political Systems in The Face of Environmental Urgency

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### Abstract

Philosophically, humans have placed themselves in a hierarchical power relationship with the world, where they have been given the highest rank of the evolutionary ladder, hence granting them the boundless capacity to use the environment as they like. The notion of climate change and the paradox related to human activity has at present led to a broad debate about the interaction between sustainability and democracy. A fast transformation towards sustainability will rapidly change individual lifestyles, thus the modern liberal assumption of Good Life (the Aristotelean 'euzên') that allows maximized individual freedom is incompatible with the need to lower consumption. Once politics takes sustainability seriously, it has to influence the way people live, their mobility, consumption, housing, etc. It is difficult to draw any certain conclusions on the most appropriate model of governance for tackling the wicked problem of climate change. This paper examines the broad issues that both authoritarian and democratic governments face as a result of climate change. By comparing and contrasting the political systems and climate policies of the US and China it provides a broad evaluation of the state of global climate governance. To assess the advantages and disadvantages of democratic and autocratic systems in tackling the climate catastrophe, the study consults secondary sources, policy papers, and current academic literature. The analysis ends with suggestions for how democracies might change to better satisfy the needs of a sustainable future.

**Keywords:** *democracy, climate change, sustainable, transformation, authoritarianism.*

### RETHINKING DEMOCRACY AND THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION

The notion of climate change and the paradox related to human activity has now led to a public debate. Humans have been given the highest evolutionary rank, which gives them unrestricted authority to take advantage of the environment in any way they see fit. This has led them to believe that they live in a hierarchical power relationship with the world. Their new emphasis should be on relationships of understanding, cooperation, and accommodation rather than dominance, exploitation, and power (Oberauer, 2021).



Authoritarian governments are currently waging a fierce battle against democratic institutions, and international rivalry appears to be impeding the likelihood of a smooth transition to more sustainable practices. The relationship between sustainability and democracy is currently the subject of heated discussion in the fields of political science and political philosophy, climate-challenged Society (Dryzek et al., 2013).

The potential consequences for the "climate-challenged society" that results from the ecological catastrophe have been examined by authors like Dryzek (Dryzek et al., 2013). The 1980s saw the development of what is commonly referred to as "green political theory" (Goodin, 1999). The climate situation has thus been referred to as a "wicked problem" by several scientists (Head, 2008). The design theorist Horst Rittel first introduced the term "wicked problems" in the 1970s to refer to challenges that are hard or impossible to solve because the knowledge and requirements necessary to do so are insufficient, conflicting, and ever-changing. Since the causes and solutions of these issues are interconnected, attempting to resolve one facet of a wicked problem may uncover or generate others. As a result, wicked problems can only be somewhat effectively alleviated rather than fully treated. Furthermore, wicked challenges frequently cross organizational and disciplinary boundaries, involve a large number of individuals with competing interests, and have significant economic and societal repercussions. The democratic process may encounter challenges as a result of wicked problems.

According to Habermas, democracy has two opposing components. On the one hand, democracy relies on individual liberties that shield people from oppression, fear, and authoritarianism. Human rights are essentially the most basic manifestation of the classical liberal concept of the rule of law, which ensures that citizens feel free and secure. However, democracy involves more than simply "negative freedom"; a second component is citizens' rights, sometimes known as "positive freedom," which includes the ability to express oneself, participate, and voice one's interests and opinions, either individually or in a structured and institutionalized manner. Another name for this second component might be the concept of popular sovereignty. Every political action must somehow take into consideration the wishes of the people; as a result, responsiveness and accountability are essential to a healthy democracy (Habermas, 2001). The way the topic of sustainability is presented is affected by this notion of democracy. What would happen if free persons, either individually or collectively as a political society, decided to live in a way that is not sustainable? It appears that democracy lacks a system to stop irresponsible behaviour or collective suicide. To put it another way, democracy challenges the notion of the Great Transformation, while sustainability challenges the philosophy of democracy. The need to reduce consumption and the modern liberal assumption of a privatized concept of the Good Life or 'euzên' that permits maximum individual freedom are incompatible, as demonstrated by successful examples of a rapid transition to a more sustainable lifestyle. Furthermore, once politics takes sustainability seriously, it must affect how people live, including their housing, consumption, transportation, and other aspects of their lives. Liberals nowadays frequently stress the need to defend individual lives and the private domain against what they perceive to be new kinds of paternalism. Thatcher's assertion that "there is no such thing as society" (Ho, 2010) may appear to be a parody of liberalism, yet it accurately conveys the notion that all important choices should be made at the individual level: In this theory, the *res publica* does not exist as a collective actor (Heidenreich, 2018).



## CHALLENGES FACED BY DEMOCRACIES IN HANDLING CLIMATE CHANGE

### i. THE PARADOX OF SCIENTIFIC TRUTH

A democracy is an open society's political system. The natural order of an open society will demolish any attempt to conceal, suppress, or eradicate the truth (Lane, 2020). Plato established the idea of the Noble Lie, which is being used more and more throughout the Republic. This makes it perfectly appropriate to spread misleading information to further the general welfare. Regarding the dangerous climate change caused by humans, many leaders are agnostic. President Donald Trump, who denies climate change, has called the issue a Chinese "hoax" (Altshuler, 2025). Mann claims that human activity is primarily to blame for the changes in the climate over the past few millennia. However, Mann contends that to undermine the corpus of research on climate change, fossil fuel companies have employed scientists, sponsored lobbying in Congress, and spread false information in the media. Mann calls the fossil fuel industry's actions a "war on science." Mann contends that alternative "facts" are offered to further a goal that the fossil fuel business favours (Arboleda, 2018). However, they believe that a broad understanding of climate issues will promote energy conservation, pollution reduction, crop biotechnology, alternative and nuclear energy, global government, social justice, and even personal fitness—all of which they believe are good for society. Therefore, to promote progressive measures, they keep their reservations to themselves and tell lofty tales about the climate (Harris, 2014). It's regarded as a slippery slope. Civil society members grow sceptical of initiatives they would typically support as they learn they have been misinformed about climate change.

It is likewise ineffective in propagating the admirable myth that scientific advancements have prevented climate change and other natural catastrophes. One may wonder why money is needed if people already have the systems and answers in place. In actuality, science is still in its infancy; therefore, if the human race wants to adequately prepare for the future, it must continue researching the climate. Because of the deception that people know how to manage the planet's climate, 94% of the \$1 billion that is spent every day on climate finance globally is used to try to manage the situations that future generations may face. Just 6% of people are genuinely reached by climate change adaptation efforts. This strategy has been called immoral.

Politicians who deny the significance of climate change have been steadily changing their stances. There was outright denial five or six years ago, and they were thrilled about the notorious pause that occurred between 1998 and 2011–12 when the global average temperature did not seem to be rising as quickly as it had in the preceding few decades. This gave them a lot of confidence to claim that everything had stopped and that the scientists were mistaken. Since the pause truly ended and they understood their prior idea was no longer viable, their disagreements have now come to an end. Despite their dissatisfaction, the data was too compelling. As a result, they have developed several novel arguments. 1) Although climate change may be true, nothing can be done about it since it is too expensive. 2) It might be occurring, but we can wait because it's not bad enough. 3) The entire concept is uncertain and could either be happening or not (Krebs, 2017).

### ii. DIMENSION OF TIME.

One of the primary criticisms has been that policies in democracies are frequently short-sighted, with politicians more concerned with winning elections than with long-term objectives that might be politically unpopular. These obsessions drive politicians to implement short-term, rhetorically appealing populist initiatives when long-term thinking is needed (Banik, 2022). Therefore, sustainability seems to suggest that



politics must extend the time horizon as far as possible. However, democracy is attacked for its slowness because of the current ecological predicament, which is so serious concerning climate change (Wurster, 2013). A closer discussion between scholars of political theory and sustainability may suggest a re-evaluation of how people allocate, manage, and plan their time. On two levels, the objective of sustainability appears to contradict the traditional liberal representative democracy time regime: it makes them reconsider the notion that governments should make plans for four to five years and then let the people decide how they are doing. On the other hand, it appears that traditional democratic patterns are short-term oriented and concentrated on achieving outcomes that would help them win the upcoming elections. The intricate balance of power, the division of power on several levels, and the ability of various veto players to delay or impede decisions are all features of traditional democratic systems (Heidenreich, 2018).

### iii. MAXIMISING POLITICAL INCLUSION AND EFFICIENCY

Climate change sceptics include both the general public and the right-wing journalists who prefer fossil fuels. It turns out that despite being a deliberate movement started by fossil fuel companies, climate denial gained traction because it resonates deeply with a particular demography. These people who deny climate change believe that it is a fabricated justification for a massive top-down intervention scheme. They believe that climate activists are trying to restrict their liberties. They seek to impose dietary restrictions, eradicate rural communities, and open the door for widespread international migration. These sceptics may be mistaken about the fabricated nature of climate change, but they are unambiguously right about the effects. Things will indeed change, with a lot of people moving both inside and across nations (Finnigan, 2024).

According to climate and economics researchers, 13 degrees Celsius is the ideal temperature for economic production. The majority of today's economically dominant nations are already warmer than that. According to these analysts, the annual cost of climate change is already equal to half of the global GDP. Heat is one of the climate conditions that has a significant impact on agricultural yields. By the end of the century, when global warming is expected to reach roughly 4 degrees, as is the case if people don't alter their course, their grain yields may be just half as abundant as they are now. There are attempts to feed almost 50% more people worldwide today, but the yields are half as abundant. However, there will be much stronger intuitions about resource scarcity if the human race ends up in a world that is 3–4 degrees warmer. If there is an attempt to project what a politics based on that would entail, it can be anticipated that more zero-sum calculations of political advantage, more nationalistic self-operations or nationalistic self-interest and nativism, and more turning away from those who are suffering elsewhere in the world and concentrating on the immediate needs of one's own country. These factors are already influencing the politics in which people live (Wells, 2019).

Most economists would argue that there are genuine humanitarian costs and that people have a moral duty to take action to prevent climate change because of the suffering of people, especially those who are most in need. However, when weighed in monetary terms, climate action did not make much sense. In addition to some of the previously mentioned economic activities, it necessitated a significant upfront expenditure. These explain why there was such a glacial political movement on this issue: our policy officials around the world were worried about economic development and believed we had enough time to come up with innovative solutions. However, the conventional opinion of economists studying this subject has changed dramatically in the last few years, and in part, this is because they have begun to estimate the costs of climate change, which are significantly higher now than they were a few years ago. If the trajectory is not



altered, it is now anticipated that by the end of the century, climate damage might amount to six hundred trillion dollars, which is double the current global wealth. Additionally, GDP might be 20–30% lower than it would be in the absence of climate change. 30% would have an impact that is twice as severe as the Great Depression and would last forever, but they also see potential short-term economic prospects if moved swiftly to address climate change. Rapid decarbonization could boost the global economy by \$26 trillion by 2030, according to a significant 2018 analysis (Wells, 2019).

Over the past twenty years, Indonesia has doubled its per capita income, cut the poverty rate in half, and doubled its emissions. It is a reflection of the majority of developing nations, where increased industrialization, which is more reliant on fossil fuels, is necessary to lift people out of poverty. However, Indonesia believes that it can cut its emissions in half by 2030, surpassing its Paris Accords goals, and continue to expand at a rate of 6% annually, which is faster than its previous 5% growth rate. This exemplifies the new economic theory that says preventing a global catastrophe does not require embracing a new world with significantly slower economic growth. However, it also emphasizes that becoming significantly affluent in a short period is possible if one moves swiftly (Lindvall, 2021)

#### IS AUTOCRACY A BETTER REGIME TO TACKLE THE WICKED PROBLEM?

In addressing the issue of climate change, autocratic governments may have significant benefits over their democratic equivalents. According to prominent scientist James Lovelock, concerning climate change, "It may be necessary to put democracy on hold for a while" to allow a small number of honest officials to make judgments based on evidence that restricts individual freedom (Lovelock, 2010). When citizens' basic requirements for protection are met, such an authoritarian power exercise is accepted as acceptable in democracies during times of crisis. Two principal factors bolster this viewpoint. First, centralized policymaking restricts the power of potentially hostile actors (such as corporations), which is advantageous to authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, authoritarian leaders are not under the same pressure as democratic leaders to put the needs of the populace first, prioritizing immediate personal gain over long-term climate goals. Climate mitigation may encounter resistance from industries and communities who are unwilling to bear unequal burdens because it usually offers global advantages at the price of localized costs.

Second, authoritarian governments can quickly mobilize people and resources, using their coercive powers to limit personal liberties and unhinderedly concentrate attention, resources, and energies on their top priorities. Therefore, climate-conscious autocracies have the potential to effectively reduce carbon emissions from individuals, groups, and organizations. Known as "authoritarian environmentalism," this style of government is typified by a concentration of power in a small number of executive agencies, little public involvement in policymaking or execution outside of state-led mobilization, quick policy outputs, and restrictions on personal freedom. According to some academics, authoritarian approaches to climate governance may become increasingly prevalent and essential as modern democracies struggle to respond to climate change in a timely and efficient manner (Gilley, 2012).

Natural disasters have caused social unrest and disturbances, including violence and looting, in nations with weak state institutions and unstable political environments. Some research indicates that these events might also contribute to a growing mistrust of democracy. These circumstances can be used by an authoritarian government to increase its social legitimacy. Natural catastrophes can also reduce the likelihood of protests, which gives authoritarian governments the chance to impose more dictatorial control and restrict people's freedoms. This is particularly true in nations that already have political instability and



have an intermediate regime type. Natural catastrophes may also result in a scenario where parties with opposing interests are brought together, reinforcing national unity and enabling social and political change. Natural disasters often do not threaten the political system in industrialized democracies. In democracies, if people are unhappy with how the government is responding. In autocratic nations, such circumstances could result in regime transition, while in other countries, leadership could be punished in future elections. As an illustration, consider the April 2015 earthquake that rocked Nepal, killing 9,000 people and seriously damaging infrastructure and homes. The catastrophe drew political parties together at a time when the nation was discussing a new constitution. According to some analysts, the catastrophe aided in the progress of democratization, and two years later, Nepal had its first municipal elections in almost two decades.

Feeding the world's expanding population will become extremely challenging due to global warming. Food insecurity is therefore quite likely to rise in the future, and as a result, food costs will increase. Rising food costs put democratic institutions under strain by raising the possibility of economic and social unrest, urban riots, protests, and political instability. Such occurrences are likely to be detrimental to the advancement of global freedom and could result in a collapse of governing structures. However, these occasions could also present opportunities for the transition of autocratic governments to democracy. Non-democratic regimes are better able to silence a hungry populace, while elected leaders typically find it more difficult to maintain their hold on power if the people are unable to eat.

A move away from fossil fuels, however, may also lead to beneficial economic growth, advancing the green economy and generating employment in sectors that create the technological solutions required for a zero-carbon economy. According to an Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) assessment, the G20 nations could expand by 2.8 percent annually, if the right policies are put in place to encourage eco-friendly companies and change the economic landscape (OECD 2017). The economy may become more stable and less susceptible to changes in the price of oil if fossil fuels are eliminated. New economic models that emphasize sustainability and more local production could also have a good democratic impact by reducing economic inequality and fostering more stable economic growth. A UN-sponsored study on the post-pandemic recovery strategies of the 50 biggest nations states that only approximately 20% of total recovery expenditures were green (UNEP 2021). In 2021, while the EU is implementing its Green Deal and the USA is implementing a stimulus package under President Joe Biden, a larger portion of recovery funds may be allocated to the green sector.

A nation that receives a large influx of migrants may experience pressure, and its institutions may find it difficult to integrate newcomers and provide for their welfare. This might hinder the growth of democracy, particularly in weaker states. Through remittances, immigrants might aid in the democracy of their home nation. It is unclear how migration and democracy are related, although some evidence indicates that migration may hurt democracy in both the receiving and leaving countries. For example, migrant communities may support political and civil rights movements, although this is not always the case. It can also lead to a "brain drain," which could jeopardize democratization. However, there have generally been detrimental effects on democratic norms and standards from the massive migratory flows to the USA and the EU in recent years. 1.8 million migrants entered the EU in 2015, which fuelled right-wing authoritarian populist parties, fuelled a political debate about identity, religion, and values, and added to political polarization. According to some analysts, this resulted in a decline in EU cooperation and European democracy. Proposals to strengthen border controls have been on the political agenda in the USA, India, and the EU. The burden on undoubtedly, the impact of migration on democracy primarily depends on how policies are implemented, how well immigrants integrate, and other factors that affect the receiving



community's tolerance and xenophobic sentiments. Given the anticipated rise in migration brought on by climate change, this topic is likely to continue to dominate political discourse for some time to come.

## IS DEMOCRACY LEADING TO LOWER EMISSIONS?

Some experts believe that while economic growth initially causes environmental degradation, public perceptions of ecological protection shift as economic growth increases, thereby reducing environmental damage. The validity of such a relation to greenhouse gas emissions is increasingly questionable (Amate et al., 2024). First of all, growing living standards and economic expansion cause consumption to rise, which raises emissions. Moreover, with economic development, emissions tend to spill over between nations, as low-income nations receive a transfer of production. Although income level may increase knowledge of environmental issues like global warming, it is unclear if this has a meaningful impact on emissions. People in certain nations with high per capita carbon emissions are less worried about the climate crisis than people in low-income nations. This could mean that people who have grown accustomed to a lifestyle that relies heavily on fossil fuels are unwilling to acknowledge the effects this has on the environment (Maler, 2001). Climate attitudes are influenced by several other factors outside wealth level, including the educational system, public institution trust, news media's scientific objectivity, the fossil fuel industry's influence, and firsthand knowledge of climate-related occurrences. Politicians find it challenging to advance a progressive political agenda on a problem for which there are no ideal solutions. The agenda-setting process may be hampered by the lack of clarity and frequently conflicting information regarding the nature of the issue and its remedies. Given that every political solution to handle a wicked problem might be condemned for not addressing the problem fully or for creating new problems and igniting numerous social and economic debates, politicians may find it challenging to provide a tangible and effective climate policy. Furthermore, because the results of different policies are frequently unclear, it can be challenging for people to assess the effectiveness of a policy being pursued and to hold politicians responsible.

The fact that the same people who need to offer solutions are also responsible for the crisis is another barrier to widespread climate mobilization, which is connected to the severity of the issue. Since there are no obvious victims or offenders, it has been challenging for the effort to create a shared political identity. The climate issue lacks the dynamic of a perceived "us and them" confrontation, which has been an essential element of past social movements, including the labour movement and the women's rights movement. In recent years, however, the climate movement has gained strength, partly by leveraging the competing features of intergenerational challenges. Additionally, the idea that human acts, like consumer decisions, may address global warming has come under increased scrutiny, while corporate responsibility has been emphasized (Lindvall, 2021).

## COMPARISON BETWEEN REGIMES USING CASE STUDIES

### Case Study 1: Policy Volatility in the United States and the Challenges of Long-Term Climate Commitments.

One of the biggest producers of greenhouse gases in the world, the United States, is a prime example of how party polarization and election cycles may make it difficult for democratic governments to implement consistent and successful climate policies. The nation's participation in the Paris Agreement serves as a particularly instructive example.



Under President Barack Obama, the United States committed to aggressive emissions reduction goals and played a significant role in the negotiations of the Paris Agreement in 2015. However, President Donald Trump announced the United States' withdrawal from the deal in 2017, claiming national sovereignty and economic concerns, as part of a campaign pledge (Bang et al., 2016). Rather than long-term environmental planning or scientific consensus, this decision was influenced by short-term political objectives and lobbying pressure from the fossil fuel corporations. To regain its position as a worldwide leader in climate governance, the United States re-joined the Paris Agreement when President Joe Biden took office in 2021. The back-and-forth approach taken by different administrations, however, emphasizes how brittle climate policy is in democracies, where election changes have the power to quickly revoke previous pledges (Rabe, 2007). The situation in the United States highlights a larger trend: democracies encourage openness and public involvement, but they frequently find it difficult to implement and maintain the long-term, occasionally controversial measures required to properly address climate change.

### Case Study 2: China's Authoritarian Efficiency and Its Limits in Climate Governance

China's massive investments in electric vehicles, renewable energy, and extensive infrastructure have made it a popular example of state-driven climate policy. Because of its authoritarian political system, decisions can be made quickly and long-term plans may be carried out without the delays that come with democratic negotiation (Li & Wang, 2012). However, its climate governance also suffers from significant inefficiencies and paradoxes brought about by this centralized control. Despite this initiative, China's ongoing reliance on coal is the main reason it continues to be the world's greatest emitter of carbon dioxide. In sharp contrast to its climate goals, China authorized the construction of more than 100 new coal-fired power facilities in 2023 alone (Global Energy Monitor, 2023). Local politicians frequently undermine the national government's climate ambitions by putting short-term economic growth and employment ahead of environmental responsibilities. To seem in line with national objectives, local administrations may also underreport pollution levels or fabricate emissions data in an authoritarian regime. Furthermore, the political climate in China suppresses press freedom, independent research, and civil society involvement—all essential components of environmental accountability. When environmental activists speak out against pollution or contradict government narratives, they may be subject to surveillance, censorship, or even arrest. Although China's centralized government permits swift action, the efficacy and sustainability of its climate policies are eventually hampered by its lack of accountability, transparency, and grassroots involvement (Steinhardt & Wu, 2016).

### Implications

People who live in democracies are the highest emitters. Only slightly more than 4% of people on Earth reside in nations that are deemed completely democratic by the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, but they bear greater responsibility for eight percent or so of global emissions. On the other hand, despite making up 40% of emissions, authoritarian nations are home to one-third of the world's population. About 45% of people reside under democracies with flaws, and 18% do so under hybrid regimes; they are responsible for 43% and 10%, respectively. Many of the worst polluters per capita are located in non-oil-producing democracies, including the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kazakhstan. However, several well-known democracies, including the USA, Canada, Mongolia, Australia, and the Republic of Korea, are also among the top 20 nations in terms of emissions per person because of their economies that rely heavily on fossil fuels. According to this assessment, structural inefficiencies limit both regime types (Lindvall, 2021).



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The paper highlights that structural inefficiencies limit both democratic and authoritarian regimes. Democratic governments frequently lack the political unity required for long-term climate action, despite their greater transparency and participation. Although authoritarian governments can be quickly put into place, they usually lack transparency, accountability, and meaningful public participation. Therefore, regime type by itself does not determine the success of climate policy; rather, it influences results through interactions with governance practices, institutional design, and civil society engagement. Thus, democracy needs to be transformed to implement a sustainable lifestyle. Green republicanism is one potential approach to rethinking democracy as it is evolving to meet democratic norms. Authors like Barry, Cannavò, and Honohan are credited with coining the term (Barry, 2012). According to this school of thinking, there are at least two ways to put democratic ideas into practice, and liberal democracy is just one of them. Unlike the liberal tradition, which prioritizes individual liberty, republicanism is a second school that promotes the essential function of the *res publica*, or common welfare. The notion that sustainability can be compared to the paradigm of citizens being dedicated to the common good in traditional republican regimes in Athens, the Florentine Republic, or Switzerland unites the various Green republican approaches (Heidenreich, 2018). If the goal of politics is to implement collective freedom through shared decisions rather than to maximize individual freedom, then these decisions may restrict individual freedom. Though hotly contested in many nations, requiring citizens to provide sustainability services could be a significant means of advancing this republican concept. The current capitalistic system needs to be redesigned to address the threat posed by climate change. It could be remodelled in a way that makes humans more resilient.

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## Bodies and Ecosystems: The Gendered Politics of Reproductive and Environmental Rights in the USA

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### Abstract

This study addresses the link between reproductive rights, gender equity, and ecological conservation in the United States of America (USA), with a special focus on abortion politics vis-a-vis environmental concerns. The perpetuation of various systemic barriers, such as social stigma and restrictive legislation, make critical health services inaccessible to marginalized groups. These inequalities were only heightened after *Roe v. Wade* was overturned in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, reinforcing the control that patriarchal structures impose on women's reproductive decisions. The study examines the intersection of reproductive and climate justice, focusing on the political economy of vulnerable women, resource scarcity, and migration dynamics. It critiques the ecofascist rhetoric, highlighting how reproductive control enforces racial and economic oppression in the US. There is a pressing need for inclusive policies, as the dual forces of climate change and an increasingly restrictive Republican government further entrench systemic constraints on women, magnifying their health vulnerabilities. This is further compounded by the defunding of abortion services and retreat from international climate agreements and World Health Organisation (WHO) commitments by the US. Viewed through an ecofeminist lens, this study underscores the need to integrate reproductive rights and abortion access into the broader social justice agenda, fostering global sustainability and advancing the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

**Keywords:** *Reproductive justice, eco-fascism, abortion rights, climate, Sustainable Development Goals*

### Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of men, women, girls and boys. Gender, though interactive with sex, is distinctively different from the latter, which refers to the different biological and physiological characteristics of females, males and intersex persons, such as chromosomes, hormones and reproductive organs (WHO, n.d.-a).

Gender influences people's access to healthcare, while also playing a pivotal role in determining its outcomes. Women face barriers in the form of stigma and restrictive policies. There is an ever-increasing women's health gap with only 1% of healthcare research and innovation invested in female specific conditions. Various studies also indicate that there is an inherent gender bias in receiving medical care which directly affects their health span (WHO, 2021).



The goal of Universal Health Coverage (UHC) is to ensure that everyone has access to a wide range of high-quality healthcare services whenever and wherever they need them, without facing financial hardship. One of the goals that the world's governments established when they approved the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 was to achieve UHC (WHO, 2025). The American College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (ACOG) stated that abortion is essential health care. While 95% of obstetrician-gynaecologists (OB-GYNs) support the provision of abortion care and agree with ACOG, only a very small number of them now conduct abortions, showing that abortion provision is not a standard component of most general OB-GYN practices (Fay et al., 2022). In practice, abortion has long been vulnerable to legislation through TRAP (Targeted Restrictions on Abortion Providers) laws and more subtle harms caused by separating attendees and trainees from the lived realities of providing stigmatised care because few care for many and are asked to do so primarily in independent clinics (Jerman et al., 2017).

The best foundation for sound health policy is evidence-based medicine and scientific facts. The best medical care is given without interference from politicians in the doctor-patient relationship. Politics should not take the place of women's and their doctors' personal judgement (The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, n.d.-a). Many social, economic, and cultural facets of contemporary society are significantly impacted by unwanted pregnancies. The 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision which legalised abortion nationwide, had a significant role in replacing illegal abortion and abortion procured outside of the United States. Before abortion became legal, an estimated 1 million abortions were done annually, few of them legally, and between 1,000 and 10,000 women per year died as a result of complications from these frequently dubious procedures (Committee on Unintended Pregnancy, 1995).

In a concerning turn of events in July 2022, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organisation*, overturning *Roe v. Wade*, the ruling that had made abortion legal in the country (Damante & Jones, 2023). Since *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, the US Constitution no longer protects women's right to choose whether to have an abortion or carry a pregnancy to term. Not all groups are equally affected by abortion regulations; many members of systematically marginalised groups experience disproportionate burdens and difficulties in obtaining abortions (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Due to a variety of variables, such as living far from a health centre, having a higher likelihood of being uninsured or underinsured, or having lower employment, these populations may already have limited access to abortion and other reproductive health care. In addition to being discriminatory, the systematic denial of timely access to safe abortion services is a manifestation of a gendered power struggle in which women's bodies are instrumentalised in order to forward a patriarchal goal (Adler et al., 2023). Over time, the government's control over women's capacity for reproduction has become so severe that it infringes on their human rights by affecting their bodies. Under the guise of birth and population control, they actually engage in overtly torturing women and interfering with their natural cycles (Hartmann, 1997).

### **Intersecting Justice: Reproductive Rights and Climate Action**

Reproductive justice and climate justice have drawn a lot of focus lately, especially in relation to its intersectionality. Women's reproductive potential, particularly the ability of low-income and women of colour to conceive and bear children, has long been recognised as a potential threat to political, economic, environmental, and geopolitical security (Sasser, 2023). These groups are less likely to own land and resources, have less education, training, access to information, health services, and institutional support, and have fewer



opportunities to participate in decision-making, which has been shown to make them more susceptible to the effects of climate change (Amorim-Maia et al., 2022). Coercive reproductive interventions and practices, such as forced sterilisation, contraception testing, and restricted access to reproductive health services in low-income communities of colour, were linked by reproductive justice campaigners to these myths (Sudhinaraset et al., 2020).

Rapid population increase and high fertility are frequently associated with women's and girls' lack of autonomy and opportunity. In order to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those pertaining to gender equality, education, and reproductive health, people must be empowered to make decisions that will slow the rate of population growth worldwide. The knowledge and services required to decide whether and when to have children are currently unavailable to millions of people worldwide, primarily in low and lower-middle-income nations (WHO, 2024). This leads to high rates of childbirth throughout life since women and girls are frequently unable to exercise their entire set of rights, including the right to procreate.

The relationship between population growth, climate change, and food security has gained increasing attention among scholars and policymakers. Rapid demographic expansion – in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia – along with environmental degradation, including water scarcity, soil depletion, and fisheries collapse, are contributing to food insecurity and fuelling greenhouse gas emissions (FAO et al., 2024). Some researchers argue that expanding voluntary family planning services, including safe abortion access, may indirectly contribute to population stabilization, thereby enhancing food security and environmental sustainability. Population growth is a significant driver of environmental stress leading to higher demands for food, energy, and land which causes increased deforestation, agricultural emissions, and resource consumption. According to the United Nations Population Fund, investments in reproductive health services, including safe abortion where legal, can help slow population growth, which in turn reduces pressure on ecosystems and supports climate change mitigation (United Nations Population Fund, 2022). Reducing unintended pregnancies by improving access to contraception and abortion services can positively impact food security. Families with fewer dependents can allocate more resources per child, improving nutrition and economic stability. Voluntary family planning has been found to be one of the most cost-effective strategies for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to hunger, poverty, and climate action (Starbird et al., 2016). A demographic study analysing data from 116 countries found that those with better access to reproductive services, including abortion, maintained lower population growth rates. This allowed for more manageable development and improved resource distribution (Bongaarts & O'Neill, 2018). The study also highlighted that to keep growth rates under 1%, most countries need abortion rates between 201 and 500 per 1,000 live births, especially when contraceptive use is not universal. However, this view is not without ethical and practical counterarguments (Mumford & Kessel, 1984).

Critics argue that linking abortion to environmental or food policy risks commodifying human life and infringing on moral and religious values. WHO emphasizes on comprehensive reproductive healthcare that prioritizes individual rights and autonomy (WHO, 2022). There is an increasing need of prevention first. According to the Guttmacher Institute, most unintended pregnancies can be prevented with sufficient access to contraception and sex education. This allows societies to manage population growth while reducing reliance on abortion, aligning with broader public health and ethical standards (Guttmacher Institute, 2022). Historically, population control efforts not grounded in human rights frameworks have led to coercive practices. The United Nations stresses that reproductive policies must be voluntary, rights-based, and free from government-mandated quotas or pressure. Safe abortion access should be part of a holistic reproductive



health approach, not a tool for coercion (United Nations, 2024). The United Nations Population Division explicitly warns against framing abortion or any reproductive service as a population control tool. Instead, it advocates for informed choice and bodily autonomy (United Nations Population Division, 2021). Even in recent years, the shadow of coercion has lingered. A striking example came to light in 2013, when an investigation uncovered that dozens of incarcerated women in California were sterilized between 2006 and 2010, often without fully informed consent. Many of these women reported being pressured into the procedures or misled about their nature and permanence (Johnson, 2013). These events pointed to deeper systemic issues where medical decisions were shaped by power imbalances and not patient choice. Even if policies aimed at population management begin with good intentions, history shows how easily they can slip into harmful territory when bodily autonomy is sidelined. Without a foundation rooted in reproductive justice such efforts risk repeating the injustices of the past.

### Fractured Ethics: From Ecofeminism to Eco-fascism

The relationship between the domination and exploitation of women and the rampant exploitation of nature through masculinist methods and attitudes is implicit in the mission of ecofeminism. Cooperation, compromise, dialogue, and actively striving to mitigate, and reduce suffering and prevent violent confrontation are all examples of ecofeminist values and the practices that they define. Some indigenous peoples may even associate the term feminism with colonial logics. The unified female perspective, that underpins mainstream feminism has been shaken by indigenous feminists as a result of this criticism (Kitch, 2023). This inherently racist and patriarchal viewpoint is important for environmental issues since it reflects the obsessions of the radical conservative. A prominent conspiracy theory in eco-fascism warns of an alleged plot to replace Christian whites with non-whites, German immigrants, and Jews (Macklin, 2022). The argument includes blaming such supposedly lesser beings for today's environmental degradation, since ecofascists deny that the worst polluters in history have been settler colonialists and white-controlled mega-corporation (United Nations, n.d.). Abortion prohibition and anti-immigration policies are ecofascist tactics for thwarting the replacement plot because, taken together, they will contribute to the replenishment of what Justice Alito calls the 'domestic supply of white infants' in order to maintain white racial dominance in the United States (Hernandez-Simmons, 2022). Population Matters, a UK-based charity, makes the claim the human population has reached the peak of unsustainability and suggests the solution is to have smaller families which can be achieved through meticulous family planning and by knowing its benefits (Population Matters, n.d.).

Eco-fascism attributes the climate catastrophe on migration and population growth rather than the unchecked authority and destructiveness of corporations and the ultra-wealthy. Numerous white proponents of birth control and reproductive rights have historically depended on racist, dehumanising tropes about population control and lowering poverty, waste, and consumption. Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood radicalized economist Thomas Robert Malthus's theory, that maintained that overpopulation was unavoidable. Sanger made it her life's mission to advocate for legalised birth control, but was heavily criticised for her belief in eugenics, which is an inherently ableist and racist ideology, deeming certain people to be unfit to have children. 79% of Planned Parenthood locations are located in predominantly black and brown communities (WYV Archive, 2021). Reproductive justice is fundamentally opposed to eco-fascist ideology, despite the fact that these views have historically been exploited to further eco-fascism and are still used as a weapon today.



Climate change has gendered health consequences, with growing evidence showing that it disproportionately harms women – especially pregnant individuals and women of colour. In the U.S., exposure to air pollution such as fine particulate matter (PM<sub>2.5</sub>) and ozone during pregnancy is strongly associated with adverse birth outcomes. A systematic review found that 79% of studies reported a link between PM<sub>2.5</sub> and preterm birth, while 86% linked it to low birth weight (Bekkar et al., 2020). Additionally, rising temperatures due to climate change have been shown to increase the risk of preterm labour, particularly among women without access to cooling or adequate prenatal care (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Exposure to wildfire smoke, which is becoming more common due to climate-driven fire seasons, is also tied to higher rates of low birth weight, stillbirth, and preterm birth (Shirvell, 2025). Importantly, these climate-related health risks are not evenly distributed. Black women in the U.S. are significantly more likely to experience adverse pregnancy outcomes linked to environmental exposures, including air pollution – demonstrating how structural racism and environmental injustice intersect (Lopez-Littleton & Sampson, 2020). Together, these findings illustrate that climate change is not only an environmental issue but also a reproductive and racial justice issue, calling for policies that protect those most vulnerable to its impacts.

### Reshaping Constitutional Protections under Trump 2.0

The year 2025 started with a series of wildfires in Los Angeles. Although the media and social media highlighted the loss of shopping malls and celebrity mansions in the wake of the Los Angeles fires, impacts on the neighbouring black communities have gone underreported (ET Online, 2025a). The affected area of Altadena is a historically Black neighbourhood where generations of people of colour started to settle during the civil rights era to avoid discriminatory housing practices elsewhere. In such communities of colour, systemic injustices and historical underinvestment increase the effects of natural disasters like the wildfires in Los Angeles (Oladipo, 2025).

Due to their histories of displacement, precarious immigration and citizenship status, and challenges navigating new healthcare systems in their new countries, refugees and migrants may have limited access to and use of abortion care. Refugees and migrants in the U.S. face multiple barriers to abortion access due to restrictive laws, language barriers, and precarious immigration status. The Hyde Amendment disallows the use of federal funds for abortion, which excludes a large number of immigrant women (dependent on Medicaid) from care (Gutmacher Institute, 2021). Data indicates that around 1.9 million undocumented immigrant women reside in states with stringent abortion restrictions, intensifying inequalities in reproductive access (Arvallo et al., 2024). Globally, nearly 25% of refugees are women of reproductive age, many of whom are displaced to countries with limited or no access to safe abortion services (Erhardt-Ohren & Prata, 2025). These disparities highlight the need for inclusive reproductive justice frameworks that centre on migrant and refugee populations. Several researchers have explored how the migrant and refugee youth's reproductive health and rights are a global health issue. Migration and displacement can disrupt access to education and care for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Research (SRHR). Furthermore, sexual and reproductive health are stigmatised and taboo in many immigrant and refugee communities. However, immigrant women across regions except Southern Africa, displayed a 2–5 times greater chance of having an induced abortion than women born in Australia and New Zealand, the United States, and Northern and Western Europe. There are additional, enduring effects on SRHR following a climate event (Aibangbee et al., 2024). As high as 99% American women who have engaged in sexual activity, say they have used some kind of contraception, while 87.5% reported having used a very effective reversible method. Access to contraceptives, maternity and childcare, abortion services, and post-abortion care for communities affected by crises can all be jeopardised



by disruptions in health services. If untreated, increases in STIs can have detrimental long-term health effects on women, such as infertility, ectopic or tubal pregnancy, cervical cancer, and perinatal or congenital infections in babies born to afflicted mothers. Pregnancy complications, unplanned pregnancies, and birth deaths can all increase when access to contraception is restricted (The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, n.d.-b). Worldwide, unsafe abortion is the reason behind at least 9% of maternal fatalities. After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Black community in New Orleans, Louisiana, saw lower fertility rates, probably because of displacement and financial instability (Women Deliver, 2021).

Following Dobbs, immigrant women encounter some of the most significant barriers to obtaining reproductive healthcare. As of June 2024, a massive 1.9 million (undocumented) immigrant women live in states that restrict abortion. Border states with some of the strictest abortion restrictions in the nation, like Texas and Arizona, are home to a large number of these women. In addition to these obstacles, dual attempts to criminalise immigration and abortion put immigrant women at greater risk (Lakhani, 2024). The main means of accessing care for women who are subject to abortion restrictions is now across state lines. However, many immigrant women are unable to take advantage of this option because of stringent enforcement measures which render it challenging for them to travel on the roads in secure conditions. Consequently, nearly 17% of abortion patients travelled out of state for care in the first half of 2023 which is a significant increase from 9% in 2020. Addressing these disparities faced by immigrant women necessitates policy reforms that ensure equitable access to reproductive healthcare, and thus reduce the compounded challenges (Forouzan et al., 2023).

President Donald Trump has issued numerous executive orders pertaining to immigration since assuming office on January 20, 2025 opening the door for a broad campaign to target undocumented immigrants in the United States. An executive order to abolish birthright citizenship as guaranteed in the 14th Amendment to the US constitution citing the 1898 Supreme Court decision in *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, which upheld birthright citizenship was one of Donald Trump's first actions as the 47th president of the United States (Treisman, 2025). The executive order faced immediate legal challenges, resulting in multiple federal courts issuing injunctions to block its enforcement (Mann, 2025). Trump's immigration policy is based on the promise of mass deportations and the removal of illegal immigrants from the United States (BBC News, 2025). [Reproductiverights.gov](https://reproductiverights.gov), a website created by the Biden Administration's Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to disseminate information about access to reproductive health care and abortion, went offline shortly after he took office (ET Online, 2025b).

While on an Air Force One tour of wildfire ravaged Los Angeles, President Trump signed two executive orders on abortions. The first would reintroduce the Mexico City policy, which bars federal funding for foreign nongovernmental organisations that perform or support abortions. The second was an order upholding a long-standing federal policy that states the United States does not pay for abortions with federal funds (Sullivan, 2025). Historically, up to roughly \$600 million in foreign aid is impacted by the resuscitation of the Mexico City policy. But during his first term, Trump significantly broadened the application of the Mexico City policy, which proponents of abortion rights refer to as a 'global gag rule.' The Trump administration extended the policy to organisations that provide a variety of health services globally, rather than just family planning assistance, as was customary. This resulted in the policy affecting billions of dollars' worth of aid (Clayton et al., 2025). Abortion restrictions can prevent access to contraception, encourage women to seek unsafe abortions, and create chaos among nongovernmental organisations that rely on US aid to continue their programs, according to the Guttmacher Institute, which studies abortion restrictions and their effects (Guttmacher Institute, 2024). The United States has had significant influence over the course of international health policies and initiatives for many years but is unlikely to be present at the next meeting of the WHO



executive board in February 2025, as a result of Trump's decision to withdraw from the organisation, citing the WHO's mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic. In low-income nations, those repercussions will disproportionately affect marginalised communities that already face major obstacles to accessing health care (Maxmen, 2025). Furthermore, the U.S. withdrawal further stigmatises a wide range of vital services by sending the harmful message that global health, including HIV/STI treatment, maternal health, and access to fundamental services and information about SRHR, is not a priority.

### Aligning Abortion Access with the SDG Agenda

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3: Good Health and Well-Being, and SDG 5: Gender Equality; are intricately linked to abortion. Both objectives depend on women's health and ability to exercise their reproductive rights, which are directly impacted by the availability and legalisation of safe abortion services. Unsafe abortions seriously undermine SDG 3's goal of universal health and well-being and are of particular threat to women's lives. These procedures are frequently the result of restrictive laws or a lack of access to healthcare. Many women experience complications in areas where unsafe abortions are common, placing a burden on healthcare systems and resulting in a tragic death that could be avoided with adequate access to safe abortion services. Moreover, several other SDGs are also impacted by the access to safe abortion. For example, accidental pregnancies can reinforce poverty and pose a barrier to educational attainment. This influences SDGs 1: No Poverty and 4: Quality Education. Similarly, draconian abortion laws disproportionately impact low-income and marginalised women, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities and influencing SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities (WHO, 2017). Therefore, there are several facets to the relationship between abortion and the SDGs. It has wider socioeconomic ramifications in addition to direct effects on women's health and gender equality. Identifying and addressing the complex interactions between abortion rights and other aspects of sustainable development is key to attaining the SDGs. In order to achieve the SDGs in a number of areas, including poverty eradication, health, and environmental sustainability, the United States' withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement seriously jeopardises international cooperation on climate change, which could result in higher emissions, hinder efforts to combat extreme weather events, and limit access to clean energy (WHO, n.d.-b). The executive order directly jeopardises the struggle for climate justice, multilateral cooperation, and international solidarity. The United States, the biggest carbon emitter in history and the world's largest producer of fossil fuels, is speeding up the process of a climate catastrophe by prioritising the expansion of oil and gas extraction, which will make vulnerable communities around the world suffer the consequences of a crisis they did not cause (Lashof, 2024).

### Conclusion

It is evident that in the United States, historical, political, and socioeconomic factors have shaped the intricate relationship between gender, abortion rights, and environmental issues. The exploitation of women's bodies and the environment is mirrored in the control over women's reproductive rights, which is a reflection of larger patterns of gendered power dynamics. Legislation has limited women's reproductive autonomy under the guise of morality, demographic concerns, and national interest, much like natural resources are frequently depleted for political and economic gain. Women, especially those from marginalised communities, are disproportionately impacted by climate change, which exacerbates preexisting vulnerabilities in reproductive autonomy, economic stability, and access to healthcare. Maternal and reproductive health is significantly



impacted by extreme weather events, increased pollution, and resource depletion, which increases complications like low birth weight, premature deliveries, and pregnancy-related mortality. The gendered health gap in the United States is further widened by the fact that low-income and Black and Brown women are disproportionately affected by these crises because of racial and economic disparities in healthcare access. The governance model that puts corporate and political interests ahead of human rights and environmental sustainability is reflected in both abortion restrictions and climate inaction at the policy level. Women who already face socioeconomic disadvantages were disproportionately affected by the 2022 reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, which increased barriers to reproductive healthcare. Global environmental efforts have been hampered at the same time by the U.S. government's reversal of climate commitments, which includes leaving international agreements and increasing the extraction of fossil fuels. Marginalised communities suffer disproportionately from these policies, which exacerbate systemic injustices that restrict access to safe abortion services and environmental safeguards.

A comprehensive strategy that places reproductive justice at the centre of social justice and environmental frameworks is needed to address these interdependent crises. Promoting gender equality and sustainability requires policies that increase access to healthcare, defend the right to an abortion, and address climate change. It is impossible to achieve true environmental justice without protecting reproductive autonomy. The fight for bodily autonomy must be seen as an essential component of the fight for a just and sustainable future in the United States, where both abortion and climate policies have become more politicised.

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## Indian Feminism: Historical Progress, Impact and Unresolved Issues

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### Abstract

Gender refers to the societal norms, behaviours, roles, and interactions associated with women, men, girls, and boys. Gender, being a social construct, varies among cultures and evolves over time. Patriarchy, an extensively embedded concept, is inherently tied to gender, resulting in a power structure that reinforces male domination. Feminist discourse challenges patriarchal structures. It promotes equality and justice for people who face gender inequity. Despite the continued strength of Indian patriarchy, male domination has been significantly challenged by three waves of feminism. This comprehensive inquiry focuses at the key characteristics of three distinct phases of Indian feminism, as well as their significant impact on women's lives. Many laws supporting gender equality have been enacted, yet their enforcement remains insufficient. Women continue to experience various forms of violence – mental, physical, and sexual – both within the domestic sphere and in public spaces. This paper, therefore, critically explores the underlying causes of these persisting issues and evaluates how reforms in socialization processes could serve as a means to address them effectively.

**Keywords:** *gender socialization, legislative provisions, patriarchy, post-modernism.*

### Introduction

Women are accorded honour and respect as goddesses. Their icons are revered religiously at temples, and they are paid homage on their stunning white marble graves.<sup>1</sup> However, the ground realities paint a different picture. An ever-fading status in Indian society and the minimal visibility of the “second sex”<sup>2</sup> in the economic, social, and political arenas uncover that the profusion of civil and inherent rights has only marginally extended to Indian women.<sup>3</sup>

Feminism, similar to democracy, freedom, fraternity, and modernity, was also overwhelmingly a Western ideological incursion brought into India.<sup>4</sup> Feminism centred around the subordinate position and discrimination encountered by women as a consequence of their sex, was a key concept of 19th-century feminism in the West. Feminism is generally categorized into three consecutive waves. The first wave (1920s) was preoccupied with women's equal rights, particularly the voting right. The second wave (1960s and 1970s) dealt with the oppression of women in family, sex, and work. The third wave (early 1990s), based on



post-modernism and post-structuralism, turned its attention to micro-politics and a “post” understanding of gender and sex.<sup>5</sup>

The emergence and decline of Indian feminism, similar to Western feminism, can be seen in terms of three discrete waves. Nonetheless, the fact remains that, despite the discreteness of these waves, they are not watertight compartments. One wave flowed into another. The first

wave of Indian feminism emerged in two phases between the pre-independence era. During the early 19th century, feminism was interested in movements for reform that sought to liberate women through education and the abolition of discriminatory socio-cultural and religious traditions. The nationalist movement of the early 20th century registered the active involvement of women fighting the oppressive colonial state. For women of the time, the struggle against colonialism was indirectly a struggle against patriarchy, which had hitherto restricted them to domesticity.

In the mid-20th century, immediately after India gained independence, women withdrew back into the private domain. This episode, however, did not last long. The 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of the second wave of feminism. This era focused on addressing inequalities that women experienced in different aspects of life and on academic, legal, and policy changes intended to raise the status of women and end the cycle of injustice, discrimination, and deprivation.

The third wave of feminism, which started sometime during the 1990s and is ongoing today, aims to correct the failure of the second wave in providing justice to women and granting them their rightful place in society. This wave is shaped to a great extent by neo-liberal and post-modernist schools of thought. The third wave's defining characteristics include the emergence of state feminism, the widened reach of feminism made possible through communication and social media outlets, and the emergence of intersectionality.

This paper seeks to evaluate the place of women in India in both pre- independence and post- independence period. It also examines how the three feminist waves have changed the lives of the Indian women throughout the years. While the final part of this paper brings out what can be done to raise the status of women and liberate them from the centuries-old biases and prejudices of patriarchy.

### **First Wave of Feminism:**

The escalation and diminution of feminism in India are closely linked to the transformation of the identity of the ‘Indian woman.’ The first phase of the first wave of feminism was witnessed in India in the 19th century, overlapping with the social reformation movements of that time. Interestingly, feminism in its nascent state was nurtured by the wives and sisters of the (male) social reformers. The stalwarts who advocated for the emancipation of women included reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Keshav Chandra Sen, and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Among the long list of male reformers, prominent women leaders who critiqued patriarchal society included Pandita Ramabai, Rassundari Devi, and Tarabai Shinde. Thus, it would not be wrong to say that feminism existed in India long before the world coined and became acquainted with this term.

These social movements, according to many scholars, on one hand, established a secular space for women in the public sphere by eliminating biases against women's education and providing them with opportunities to study. On the other hand, these movements were quite limited, as they perceived education as a tool for upper-class women to become better housewives and mistresses of home and health. Legal provisions like the abolition of *sati* and the ratification of widow remarriage were also directed toward uplifting the status of



upper-caste Hindu women. However, the provision for widow remarriage failed to recognize the existing customary right of remarriage enjoyed by lower-caste widows. The women's organizations that emerged during this time were devoid of any ideology or independent voice. They relied heavily on the intellectual leadership of male reformists. Unfortunately, the social reform movements of the 19th century did not dare to alter the power dynamics between men and women.

Conservative customs like *purdah* began to fade away, but women were still not at the forefront as producers and owners of agencies. Their role remained limited to that of custodians of home and hearth. Patriarchy persisted; men dominated the public sphere and agency, while women were confined within the four walls of their homes. Unfortunately, women were merely beneficiaries of the humanistic treatment extended by a certain section of 'liberal' men.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the social reform movements, along with the first wave of feminism, established the image of an 'Indian woman' who was educated, non-violent, and could be controlled (or manipulated) easily.<sup>7</sup> This image found its replication in the Indian allegory of *Bharat Mata*, who was portrayed as a Mother Goddess by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and as an ascetic by Abanindranath Tagore. For Bankim Chandra, *Bharat Mata* had the feminine characteristics of beauty and a sweet voice, bestowing bliss and boons upon her children. In contrast, Tagore envisioned her as a mother figure who provided her children with learning, food, and clothing.<sup>8</sup>

The first wave of feminism resurged in the post-First World War era and continued until Indian independence in 1947. The non-violent nature of women was well utilized by Mahatma Gandhi during the independence struggle. He believed that women were best suited to carry out his non-violent strategies of *satyagraha*, boycott, picketing, and pacific civil disobedience. During this period, women participated in large numbers in *hartals*, *satyagraha*, the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement, and the Quit India Movement.

However, it is interesting to note that, in most cases, they played a supporting role, as whether in the 1920s or the 2020s, it is male figures who predominantly lead. It is always easy for patriarchal society to convince itself that men are 'born leaders,' while women can take charge only in the absence of male leadership. The first Prime Minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, notes in his book *Discovery of India* that women organized themselves in hundreds and thousands and took charge of the freedom struggle only when male freedom fighters and leaders were imprisoned. According to many feminist thinkers, this was inevitable because, under normal circumstances, the male leaders of the nationalist struggle did not encourage a second line of leadership.<sup>9</sup> They merely sought active participation and passive acceptance of male leadership from women.

Women's participation in the independence struggle had a twofold agenda: uprooting colonial rule and countering the stronghold of patriarchy. For them, showcasing the strength to defy the British administration and refusing to be intimidated by suppressive measures was a way to fight patriarchy at home. They aimed to create an image of themselves that was not timid, soft, or easily manipulated. Instead, they sought to be recognized as strong individuals capable of fighting oppression, demonstrating organizational capabilities, and assuming leadership roles.<sup>10</sup> However, these efforts could hardly bring about significant changes in the structural boundaries of family and society. The roots of patriarchy in India were so deep that true emancipation of women remained a distant goal. The communal riots during the partition period further exposed this reality. Women either became victims of violence (mostly physical) inflicted by rioters, or their own families took their lives in the name of upholding the dignity of the clan. It was easier for families to



believe that killing the women themselves was a better option than risking their bodily integrity being violated by outsiders.

Nevertheless, women like Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Hansa Mehta, Durgabai Deshmukh, Lado Rani Zutshi, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Sarojini Naidu, Durgawati Devi, Aruna Asaf Ali, and Captain Lakshmi Sehgal survived amidst such precarious conditions and exhibited the courage to express an alternative vision that challenged the strong patriarchal control of that era.<sup>11</sup> Their efforts secured Indian women numerous fundamental and constitutional rights. Unlike in Western countries, the Indian Constitution, since its inception, recognized women's right to vote, enabling them to choose their representatives. Article 15(3) of the Indian Constitution empowered the state to make special provisions for women. Fifteen women members of the Constituent Assembly represented the needs and demands of Indian women, securing rights and legislation that would empower them and help them break free from the age-old barriers of patriarchy.<sup>12</sup>

#### **Period of Accommodation (1947 to late 1960s) :**

The dawn of independence brought with it endless opportunities for development, modernization, and secularization. The Constitution established the rule of law, and from a gender perspective, everyone had an equal chance to establish a position for themselves in society. However, there was a noticeable gap between the constitutional and legal provisions for women and their actual status in society.

In the post-partition period, women retreated to their homes. The spark they had displayed during the nationalist struggle was beginning to fade. Along with it, their own identities also began to disappear. The first General Elections in the country revealed that a large number of women did not even have a name of their own. They had no individual identity and were recognized only in relation to the male members of their family. Numerous women in independent India could not even exercise their right to vote, which had been so generously granted to them.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, a state that had enacted numerous laws and regulations in favour of women had failed to recognize their names in the first place. For many women, the only identity they had was as a wife, daughter, or sister of a man who, fortunately, had a name of his own. Almost 50% of the Indian population woke up every day in an India that was free from colonial rule but not from the grip of patriarchs within their own families.

Not all Indian women had an equal opportunity to elect their legislators. However, legislators continued to formulate numerous laws to benefit and uplift the status of women. Some of these legislations included the Hindu Marriage Act (1954), the Hindu Succession Act (1956), the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act (1956), the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), and the Maternity Benefit Act (1961).<sup>14</sup>

It is important to note that, due to the absence of a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and the existence of different religious personal laws, most of these legislations were directed toward Hindu women. This scenario was quite similar to that of the 19th-century social reform movements.

#### **Second Wave of Feminism :**

The period of accommodation did not last long. After independence, Indian women had become merely docile beneficiaries of welfare, and their presence in legislative and bureaucratic institutions was negligible. Their status, identity, and position in society hardly underwent any positive change. The financial crisis of the early 1970s and the *Towards Equality* report published by the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) in 1974 paved the way for the second wave of feminism in India.



The media also played a crucial role in shaping the second wave of feminism. Constant reporting on violence against women provided women across the country with numerous instances to examine the effectiveness of existing laws.<sup>15</sup> The new social movements of the 1970s merged with feminist movements, drawing public attention to a relatively new strand of thought known as eco-feminism. The Chipko Movement of 1973 and the works of renowned eco-feminist Vandana Shiva are among the finest examples of this merger.<sup>16</sup> In addition to eco-feminism, India saw the establishment of Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in 1972 which is a major trade union that advocates for the rights and empowerment of self-employed women, particularly those in the informal economy.<sup>17</sup>

The price rise in the early 1970s, coupled with high inflation rates and increased unemployment, directly affected women's traditional role in the household. For the first time since independence, women were back on the streets, protesting against economic stagnation and unchecked corruption. A parallel can be drawn between women's participation in the independence struggle—particularly the Civil Disobedience Movement against the oppressive Salt Tax—and the second wave of feminism. In both cases, women took to the streets when their private domain was imperilled by the state.

The *Towards Equality* report published by the CSWI highlighted that, women from all social groups and demographic backgrounds faced disparities and injustices.<sup>18</sup> The increasing occurrence of dowry-related violence, sexual harassment in the workplace, rape, and alcoholism signified a deterioration in women's status.<sup>19</sup> The report underscored the continued inferior position of women in political, economic, and social spheres, revealing alarming trends in employment, political participation, and healthcare. It also noted society's failure to establish necessary norms and institutions to support women in their multiple roles. Additionally, the report observed that the momentum for women's issues, which had gained traction during the freedom movement, had weakened over the past two decades. It identified patriarchy—reinforced through socialization from one generation to the next—as the primary cause of these inequalities.

In response to the CSWI report, the Indian government formulated *A Blueprint of Action Points and National Plan of Action for Women* in 1976 to implement its recommendations in policy formulation. In the following decade, women were given a place in the five-year plans. The Sixth Five-Year Plan included a dedicated chapter on *Women and Development*, acknowledging women as producers and contributors to the Indian economy. The Seventh Five-Year Plan further addressed women's concerns by incorporating a chapter on *socio-economic programs*. In addition, in 1986, the Indian Parliament's *National Policy on Education* included a chapter on promoting gender equality through education, emphasizing its role in empowering women and ensuring their equal participation in society. Women's Studies also became a focal point for the University Grants Commission (UGC), leading to the introduction of specialized courses in educational institutions across the country.<sup>20</sup>

The impact of the second wave of feminism was most profound in the realms of academia, policy formulation, and legal enactments. It was during this period that Women's Studies emerged in India, and the importance of "gender politics" was widely acknowledged.<sup>21</sup> For the first time, Indian feminist writings gained international recognition. Writers such as Kamla Bhasin, Ismat Chughtai, and Shashi Deshpande, among many others, earned respect and acclaim in literature and academia. Feminist literature at this juncture moved beyond the shared experiences of upper-class women, expanding its focus to include the struggles of women from marginalized communities (for example, Dalit women) and economically disadvantaged sections of society, as well as those in rural areas and the unorganized sector. Notably, these women often faced "double discrimination"—a concept explored in depth by scholars. Studies revealed that



women from economically backward classes were not only subjected to inequality but also endured state-inflicted violence.<sup>22</sup>

The recommendations of the *Towards Equality* report had already emphasized the need for a Uniform Civil Code (UCC). Building upon this recommendation, debates on the necessity of a UCC sprang up across the nation. Though no legislation was enacted in this regard, the landmark *Shah Bano Case* (1985) led to the formulation and implementation of the *Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986*, which aimed to safeguard the rights of Muslim women upon divorce or separation. This act became the centrepiece of intense debates and scrutiny, with some arguing that it contributed to the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). However, setting aside the political discourse, this legislation was a crucial step in addressing intra-gender inequalities based on religion.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, towards the end of the second wave of feminism, civil society began playing an increasingly significant role. Several Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) emerged with diverse goals and perspectives.<sup>24</sup> These organizations provided platforms for women to collectively voice their demands and played a crucial role in promoting women's empowerment at the grassroots level.

### Third Wave of Feminism :

The confluence of the economic policies of liberalization, privatization, and globalization at the national level, along with the rise of postmodern thinking at the international level, coincided with the emergence of the third wave of feminism in India. Many thinkers believe that the rise of postmodernism, with its emphasis on "little truths," was instrumental in shaping this wave.<sup>25</sup> This intellectual shift highlighted the fact that even the second wave of feminism had failed to achieve true equity and justice for women. Marginalized women and those at the grassroots level were still being unheard by mainstream feminist discourse. Thus, the rise of the third wave was inevitable.<sup>26</sup> Neo-liberal economic reforms significantly transformed the nature of feminism in India. The initiation of state feminism, decentralization in governance, expanded channels of communication, and the advent and spread of social media have all had a profound impact on feminism and feminist movements in the 21st century.

Legal measures such as the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, the establishment of the National Commission for Women, the shift in focus of the Ninth Five-Year Plan from *development* to *empowerment* of women, and the launch of programs specifically aimed at women's welfare—such as *Mahila Samakhya*—are among the earliest manifestations of the third wave of feminism. Additionally, the codification of the *Vishaka Guidelines* (1997), which later led to the enactment of the *Sexual Harassment at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013*, further solidified the feminist movement's engagement with legal frameworks.<sup>27</sup>

This extensive list of legal provisions makes it evident that feminists had, by this time, largely shifted their focus toward acquiring state power. Formulating laws and ensuring their effective implementation at every level of governance became the prime agenda of feminist leaders. In the post-2000 era, more legislations were introduced, including the *Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005*, the *Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013*, the *Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, 2019*, and the *Nari Shakti Vandana Adhiniyam, 2023*, among others. However, it is both interesting and unfortunate to note that, despite the existence of so many legislations, violence against women persists. Women continue to be subjected to mental, physical, and sexual abuse. According to National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, in 2021, an average of 86 rape cases were reported daily in India. However, this is certainly not the complete



picture, as many cases go unreported for various reasons.<sup>28</sup> One such reason, tracing back to the time of partition, is the fear of losing societal respect. While India celebrates the diamond jubilee of its independence, it is crucial to reflect on how independent women truly are. Unfortunately, justice for one rape victim often goes unnoticed because, in the meantime, many more women become victims of sexual violence. The execution of the convicts in the *Nirbhaya* gang rape case in 2020<sup>29</sup> was seen as a landmark moment, yet within less than five years, the R.G. Kar incident occurred, reinforcing the persistent threat to women's safety.

Mangala Subramaniam has identified three key characteristics of the third wave of Indian feminism. Firstly, she highlights that globalization expanded channels of communication and funding, allowing NGOs working for women's emancipation to receive international support. The linkage between national and global civil society became stronger. Secondly, the feminist focus broadened to encompass the intersectionality of gender with caste and religion. The *Mandalisation* of Indian politics, the growing nexus between caste and politics (what Rajni Kothari termed as *casteism in politics* and *politicization of caste*), and the rise of right-wing politics—alongside the ascent of the BJP—played a major role in shaping these concerns. Lastly, the third wave placed greater emphasis on the creation and maintenance of social capital, particularly through the documentation of women's activism via women-oriented presses and journals.<sup>30</sup>

In the decade following 2010, feminist movements in India have effectively capitalized on social media platforms to mobilize support against gender-based inequalities and injustices. Social media has provided women with a powerful platform to share their personal experiences of violence—whether inflicted by family members, partners, workplace colleagues, or even strangers. It has also served as an outlet for countless women who had never spoken up before, either due to fear of shame, threats of further harm, or the patriarchal conditioning that dictates women must seek permission before asserting their voices.<sup>31</sup> The #MeToo movement of the late 2000s and the recent protest march, *The Night is Ours* (held in Kolkata in 2024 in response to the brutal rape and murder of a young doctor at the R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital, a call for justice for the victim), are prime examples of how social media has provided impetus to feminist struggles.

### The Way Forward :

Standing in 2025, the unavoidable question that Indian feminism must address is: *What is the current status of women?* The gap between legislation and implementation, which was evident in the initial years after independence, has not narrowed. With every passing year, the number of legislations and the syllabus for law students have expanded, yet the security and dignity of women remain compromised.

Our textbooks still describe things as either *natural* or *man-made*, as if biological producers—women—have no role in the realm of artificial production.<sup>32</sup> Patriarchy not only manifests itself in its ugliest forms in our daily lives but also influences us in subtle ways that we often fail to notice and reflect upon. While our society has normalized men wearing pink, it is yet to normalize the idea that cooking is not a gender-specific role, rather a fundamental life skill.

One can also highlight the fact that laws such as the *Equal Remuneration Act*, the *Right Against Discrimination*, and the *POSH Act* provide sound solutions to address workplace inequality and harassment. Instead of proposing solutions like exempting women from night shifts, efforts should be made to ensure the effective implementation of these legal protections.<sup>33</sup>



Thus, it can be concluded that merely formulating laws and ensuring their implementation cannot, by themselves, bring about gender equity in society. The entire construct of gender-based identity needs to be challenged and dismantled. As the saying goes, *charity begins at home* – it is more important to educate male children on how to respect and treat women than to simply enrol girls in self-defence courses.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 4.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 15.

<sup>20</sup> Pande, R. (2018). *The History of Feminism and Doing Gender in India*. Estudos Feministas, 26(3), 8-9.

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**Reinterpreting Gendered Narratives: Saradindu Bandyopadhyay - A Case Study.**

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**Abstract**

History through the prism of gender has recognised cultural ideas and institutions that have framed gender roles and expectations. The political and socio-cultural ambience of the late 19th and early 20th century had produced a rich cultural outcrop in Bengal, especially in Bengali literature. The social and political response of the Bengali *bhadralok* to the social questions regarding the position of women had shaped the lives of the newly educated Bengali Brahmo women as well as the curriculum developed for this expanding readership. These changes took place in the context of the nationalist leaders rallying against the mighty colonial state – leaders who were hailed as the brave sons of Mother India. This legacy of valour and martyrdom burdened Indian men with lofty aspirations and ambitious goals. These complexities were reflected in contemporary Bengali literature. This paper endeavours to examine the influence of the gender politics of the late 19th and early 20th centuries on Bengali popular literature, based on the case study of four of Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's historical novels- *Tungabhadrar Teere*, *Tumi Sondhyar Megh*, *Gour Mallar* and *Kaler Mandira*.

**Keywords:** *gender; historical fiction; New Patriarchy; Saradindu Bandyopadhyay; women's question*



### Innate politics of literature

The "linguistic turn" inspired by literary theory in historiography highlights the significance of language in forming historical comprehension. Michel Foucault and other postmodern historians contend that language shapes our understanding of reality and emphasises the importance of literary devices in historical discourse. Literature and history have a vigorous and reciprocal relationship in which each informs and enriches the other. A study of historiography reveals that while historical events inspire literary works, literary works themselves function as priceless historical artefacts. An appreciation of this interdependence enables a better comprehension of the past and, indeed, of the human condition itself. Our research question demands an analysis of Indian historical literature in the colonial context. (Foucault, 1972)

In his celebrated work, published a quarter of a century ago, Benedict Anderson argued that nations are 'imagined communities' given concrete shape by institutions such as print capitalism. In Anderson's words, there is a 'paradox' between the 'objective modernity' of nations to the 'historian's eye' and their 'subjective antiquity' in the 'eyes of nationalists'. This tension – of creating the nation while positing its long, unbroken existence – that lies at the heart of nationalism, makes the study of both nations and nationalisms fascinating, yet difficult. This contradiction has also shaped the Indian historical political novel. (Dube, 2014)

The exposure to the European concept of history created a tension within the Indian psyche which manifested itself in Indian writings particularly in historical novels. What distinguished the literary-historical writings was the conscious attempt to reconstruct the past according to contemporary needs under the compulsions of colonial rule. Patriotism became the driving force to express political ideals and, to a great extent, shaped the thought process behind a particular piece of writing. Patriotic writings as spontaneous expressions of the people against foreign domination began to emerge in the nineteenth century much before organised political movements for independence. Historical fiction<sup>1</sup> was produced in several Indian languages during this period. (Das, 1995).

A project for national literature looked at literature as an expression of the national spirit. Historical fiction in Bengali literature was pioneered by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and was sustained by Saradindu Bandyopadhyay and Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay among others.<sup>2</sup> All the worldly interests that would have otherwise divided the Bengalis – Hindus from Muslims, lower castes from upper castes, and the elite from the masses – were supposed to be countered by this sense of national pride. Literature, in that sense, was seen as inherently political. (Chakrabarty, 2004).

### The women's question

In Bengal in the early to mid-1800s, the women's question was at the centre of some of the most contentious discussions about social reform. Some of the bitterly debated issues included Rammohun Roy's opposition to *satidaha* (widow immolation), Vidyasagar's attempts to outlaw *Kulin* polygamy and legalise widow remarriage, and the Brahmo Samaj's split twice in the 1870s on issues pertaining to marriage laws and the "age of consent." According to Partha Chatterjee, nationalism had fully achieved its desired objectives by resolving "the women's question" in the final decades of the nineteenth century. (Chatterjee, 2010).

The foundation of this resolve was the division of culture into two domains: the material and the spiritual. The strongest arguments made by Western civilisation were in the material realm. The material domain lies outside



us - a mere external, that influences us, conditions us, and to which we are forced to adjust. But ultimately it is unimportant. It is the spiritual that lies within, which is our true self and essence. The external, material realm (*bahir*) is the domain of the male and is the scene of his actions, achievements and success. The home (*ghar*) represented by the woman reflects our inner spiritual self or true identity; it must remain distinct from and undisturbed by the profane actions of the material world. Thus, the division of the social realm into *ghar* and *bahir* corresponds to the delineation of social roles by gender. The hallmark of a woman's newly gained freedom was her achievement of a superior national culture through her efforts. This was the core ideological strength of the nationalist resolution of the women's question. (Chatterjee, 2010). As the need for educated wives grew, early proponents of female education saw prospects for social mobility of women as companions of men, members of civic society, and 'scientific' nurturers (Sarkar 2007). In this way, the "new" woman was subjected to a new patriarchy. By linking the mission of "female emancipation" with the historical objective of sovereign nationhood, nationalism's new patriarchy granted women the honour of a new social responsibility while also tying them to a new, but perfectly acceptable, subjection (Chatterjee, Menon, 2010).

This gender politics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was reflected in Bengali literature produced during this period. This paper endeavours to analyse how gender is perceived by a well-known novelist like Saradindu Bandopadhyay in his historical novels. The analysis is based on a case study of four of Saradindu Bandopadhyay's historical novels- *Tungabhadrar Teere*, *Kaler Mandira*, *Gour Mollar*, and *Tumi Sondhar Megh*.

### Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's historical novels

Among the stalwarts of Indian literature, Saradindu Bandyopadhyay occupies an extremely prominent place and his oeuvre is as varied as it is impressive. Though Bengal produced many eminent novelists, none could match Bandyopadhyay's incredible capacity to bring to life the long-buried past. Though best known for creating the iconic character of the fictional detective Byomkesh Bakshi, he has also written numerous novels (both historical and contemporary), plays, short stories, and film scripts. His works continue to be in print and have been adapted for radio, film and television repeatedly.<sup>3</sup> Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's body of historical works is extensive, spanning a broad timeline, ranging from ancient times to the 17th century.<sup>4</sup>

Bandyopadhyay's historical novels remain in the sphere of contemporary literary discussion.<sup>5</sup> He wrote five historical novels, four of which have been discussed in this paper – *Kaler Mandira* (1951), *Gour Mollar* (1954) *Tumi Sondhar Megh* (1958) and *Tungabhadrar Teere* (1966) (Sen, 2021). *Kaler Mandira* portrays a fictional story in the post-Gupta age, while *Gour Mollar* unfolds in the anarchy of post-Shashanka Bengal in the 7th century. *Tungabhadrar Teere* is a well-known novel that narrates a story that transpired during the Vijayanagar period in the 14th century. *Tumi Sondhar Megh*, on the other hand, unfurls during the time of Atish Dipankar, that is, during the 10th to 11th century. He also wrote *Kumarshombher Kobi* which depicts the time of the great poet, Kalidasa, during the 4th to 5th century. Saradindu Bandyopadhyay was a multifaceted writer whose historical fiction remains a significant part of his literary legacy.

In his introduction to a compilation of Bandyopadhyay's historical novels, Sukumar Sen asserted that Bandyopadhyay was not a historian, he was a storyteller for passionate history aficionados. He argued that as the stories were primarily romances, they would retain their original plot and beauty even if the historical context was completely removed. Noted poet and essayist, Mohit Lal Majumdar agreed, commenting that romance was Bandyopadhyay's main inspiration and that like Keat's 'Nightingale' he wanted to escape into the spring of life and nature. However, Majumdar also described Bandyopadhyay's *Bagher Bachha*, a short



story about Shivaji's childhood, as a 'reconquest of antiquity'. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar too praised his works for their Indian ideological context. (Sen, 2021).

### Reflection of the 'new woman' in Saradindu's novels

The novel *Tungabhadra Teere* is set in the Vijayanagara kingdom (1336-1646) in Southern India. It weaves a tale of political intrigue and secrets within the framework of the historically significant marriage of the princess of Kalinga, in modern-day Odisha, to Deva Raya, the ruler of Vijayanagara. As an epic romance the novel may also be viewed as an expression of the feminine 'voice' and how female characters have been moulded according to the needs of the time. The two contrasting characters of Bidyunmala and Monikonkona (both Kalinga princesses) proceed on their maritime journey to the powerful South Indian kingdom of Vijayanagara where they are to wed Deva Raya – a royal marriage which is really a political alliance (Chowdhury, 2016).

Bidyunmala is a woman, who in her subtle sense of self is ahead of her time. She is portrayed as being of 'pure' royal blood, born to an Aryan queen. At a time when polygamy was a widespread practice, particularly among royalty, she despises it and is disgusted by the idea of sharing her husband. Saradindu Bandyopadhyay recreates the medieval Indian period, but his own consciousness, trained in European rationalism, can't help but question practices like polygamy through a character like Bidyunmala, whose strong views mark her out as a woman far ahead of her time. This provides a sharp contrast with her stepsister, Monikonkona, the princess born of a non-Aryan woman, who, like most other women of her time, accepts the social reality of polygamy and is unperturbed by it. She is enamoured by the valour and greatness of Deva Raya and falls in love with him at first sight. Monikonkona finds her sister's disgust for monogamy to be silly since it is not only the norm but the destiny of royal princesses. Moreover, Bidyunmala, contrary to societal expectations, doesn't abide by her father's decision to marry her off to Deva Raya, and is surprisingly vocal about her own free will. Risking Deva Raya's wrath, she is direct in informing him of her decision to marry the man of her choice, Arjunbarma, a commoner. Throughout the novel, the characters of Bidyunmala and Monikonkona provide an intriguing contrast between the traditional and new ideals of womanhood as they played out in late 19th and early 20th century Bengal (Bandyopadhyay, 2021).

There were two primary threads in the pre-independence women's movement, which started in the late 1800s and lasted until about 1947. One included women's participation in the national struggle, while the other included social reform groups headed by men to free women from the "shackles of tradition." (Ramaswamy, 2013). From social reforms on women's issues advocated by men of upper class and caste to women's participation in their autonomous organisations in the 20th century, the women's movement in India influenced the psyche of educated Indian men. This is reflected in the literature of the time. Bankim Chandra's *Devi Chaudhurani*, Tagore's *Chitrangada*, and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Bamunee Mehe* are some evergreen classics that can be cited as examples. This trend of giving women an individual identity beyond their narrow domestic orbit is also portrayed in some other novels of Bandyopadhyay (Jaiswal, 2018)

*Tumi Sondhyar Megh* offers further opportunity to explore Bandyopadhyay's depiction of women assuming the right to make autonomous decisions, especially in matters that concern their future. Joubonoshree, the female protagonist of the novel, stands out as an epitome of decisiveness, strength and integrity. She holds her ground against her father who has organised a *swayamvara*<sup>6</sup> for her, deliberately excluding the man of her choice, Bigrahapal, the prince of Magadha. However, she also refuses to elope with the latter when he urges her to leave secretly with him, as it would bring shame to her paternal and marital families. Joubonoshree thus



is portrayed as a strong, woman driven by independent, rational thought who is not afraid to challenge social norms but is also strongly attached to cultural values and principles. Bigrahapal had initially been attracted to her beauty, but when she takes a strong stand by refusing to elope, she earns his respect. Though the decision would involve a great deal of risk and danger, Bigrahapal comes to appreciate her value and recognise that only such a woman could be worthy of being queen of Magadha (Bandyopadhyay, 2021).

*Kaler Mandira* is set in a period after the death of the Gupta emperor, Kumaragupta when his eldest son Skandagupta ascended the throne. The story depicts the defeat of the Pushyamitras by Skanda Gupta after a long and exhausting war, as well as his fight against the Hunas to save his homeland from invasion. In the novel, Ratta Jashodhara is a fascinating female character who visited Skandagupta's camp to enlist his support to rescue her father from enemies. She introduced herself as a Hun, born of a Hun father and an Aryan mother. She is unapologetic about her family identity and impressed Skandagupta with her fearless approach. The monarch acknowledges that no woman would ordinarily have had the courage to enter the military camp of such a large and powerful army, and it was very brave of Ratta to have entered it. He admires her strength of will and courage to have reached him after travelling through extremely difficult terrain. Ratta is shown as a woman who is catapulted out of her safe domestic space into the treacherous, overwhelmingly male world of politics and war. She remains undaunted and proves herself worthy of facing and overcoming the challenges she is faced with. Ratta, thus, may be seen as an embodiment of the ideal early 20th-century women reflected in the past (Bandyopadhyay, 2021).

Early 20th-century Bengali literature, shaped by the rising tide of nationalism, attempted to construct a new ideal of womanhood (albeit restricted to the middle class). The female characters in the works of leading writers such as Rabindranath Tagore, and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay show the contradictory aspects of nationalism through the definition of gender roles. The response of Bengali women to the dominant discourse in both politics and literature was not uniform as caste and class divisions generated different responses. Despite such divisions, the hesitant critiques by nineteenth-century women changed into a more assertive self-awareness and induced them to critically examine how the prevailing nationalist ideology imposes stereotypical roles. (Casci, 1999)

Both during the context in which Bandyopadhyay is writing and in the historical contexts in which he places his stories, women seem to dwell beyond their narrow domestic orbits. However, this autonomy is restricted in several ways. Nationalism seems to be a masculine project, where men enjoy privilege, power and responsibility. Simultaneously men also suffer the imposition of the burdens of valour and martyrdom. An ideal patriotic man was supposed to be fearless and adventurous, who was eager to die in the service of Mother India.

### **The womb of sacrifice and the legacy of martyrdom**

In resorting to the figure of Mother India to supplement the mapped form of the nation, Sumathi Ramaswamy (2008) shows how barefoot cartography<sup>7</sup> reveals its preoccupation with male bodies, especially the "big men" of official Indian nationalism. Such men are, as is apparent from the titles of patriotic prints, the "Jewels of India," the "Architects of Indian Resurrection," the "Gems of the Nation." When women (infrequently) appear in the company of the map of India, they are either depicted as honorary males or are shadowy presences. In striking contrast to much popular art in India, where women are hyper-visible in incarnations ranging from the goddess to the vamp, it is men who are accorded prominence in patriotic pictures, thus reiterating the



dominant truth about nationalism as a masculinist project, fantasy, and hope. In such pictures, Bharat Mata appears as “the conduit through which collusions and collisions” between colonized and colonizing men are worked out, allowing in this process bonds of male homo-sociality to evolve between them (Krishnaswamy, 1998). Drawing on Eve Sedgwick’s work, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), it is suggested that the nation is pre-eminently pictured as a male homosocial arena in which men jostle for power and privilege but also work out their mutual fascinations, anxieties, and hostilities through and around the exceptional figure of Bharat Mata. (Ramaswamy, 2008)

The mother, however, is not just a figure of enslavement. Feminine cults also represent power, an image of resurgent and fearful strength, irrevocably associated in the Bengali Hindu mind with the concept of Shakti on whose grace depends the success of the patriotic enterprise. There is a curious blending of both the principles of object victimhood and the possibility of triumphant strength in the polysemic iconography deployed around the matter. (Sarkar, 1987)

In barefoot cartography and the patriotic imagination that animates it, the ideal of masculinity is pictured as placing one’s life and limb at the service of the map and mother. Rejecting worldly pleasures and privileges, the ideal Indian man casts himself in this role. He is pictured as selflessly dedicated to Mother India and the territory she embodies, although there are diverse models of filial service on display. Self-effacing service to the nation and its territory might be the road to visibility in the world of patriotic pictures, yet barefoot cartographic practice also reveals its ambivalences and anxieties—as well as pride—about the ultimate patriotic endgame for men, the crowning glory of martyrdom. The martyred male body — “the body in bits and pieces” (Axel 2001), bloodied, decapitated, or hanged — is the honourable prize of the pictorial transaction between men and maps in the name of the mother. Thus, nationalist ideology — masculinist though it might be in conception and practice — brought with it its share of burdens and tragedies for men along with privilege, power, and visibility (Sarkar, 1987).

### The gendered history of martyrdom: a close reading

Bandyopadhyay’s novel *Gour Mollar* is based in the context of the anarchy that prevailed in Bengal after the death of Shashanka. The novel does not claim any historical authenticity but draws a vivid picture of Bengali life during this period. The story is initially set in Betoshgram, a village in Bengal. Rangana, the daughter born out of wedlock to Gopa and Kapil Dev, was socially ostracised. Kapil Dev was a general of Shashanka, who visited Betoshgram. Later, Rangana fell in love with Manab Deb, the son and successor of Shashanka, and gave birth to a son, Bajra Deb. Manab Deb desired to live a simple life in the village with his wife. He didn’t like the fiercely competitive urban life where people kill for power and wealth. He was a romantic man at heart but was burdened with the expectations from a *Kshatriya*, to protect his *rajya* (kingdom). His son, Bajra Deb born with the required characteristics of a ‘Kshatriya’, was physically strong, intelligent and sincere. Bajra Deb set out to look for his lost father, and despite knowing that defeat was inevitable, he fought with intense patriotic fervour to protect his *Pitri-Pitamohar Mati* (ancestral land). He managed to sit on the throne for a single night and finally succumbed to his inevitable destiny and returned home (Bandyopadhyay, 2021).

In the novel ‘**Tungabhadrar Teere**’ Arjun Barma had left his homeland, which was occupied by the *Jaban* rulers. Maharaja Debray, the ruler of the Vijayanagar kingdom was the epitome of patriotic valour, around whom the brave men congregated, to protect their motherland. Though Arjun Barma was banished from Vijayanagar by the king, he endangered his life to protect Vijayanagar from the enemy kingdom of the



Bahmani Sultanate. Though he was not born in Vijayanagar, Arjun Barma was a patriot, loyal to the king, as Maharaja Debray was the indigenous hero protecting his motherland from the invaders (Bandyopadhyay, 2021).

The novel '**Kaler Mandira**' begins with an old Hun soldier, named Mong, lamenting a courageous and victorious past, when they conquered kingdoms. Tilak Barma, the Aryan successor to the throne, returned to win back his power and glory. He eventually became the ruler and married a Hun princess, who had been assimilated into the refined Aryan social framework. In his intense love for his motherland, he later joined Skandagupta against the Huns invading India, despite having married a Hun princess. He is depicted as a brave nationalist, who vowed to live and die for his motherland. Rutta, the Hun princess is seen to have wholeheartedly supported his endeavour (Bandyopadhyay, 2021).

Each of these characters, Manab Deb, Bajra Deb, Maharaja Debray, Arjun Barma, and Tilak Barma seem to possess all the qualities expected of the 19th century nationalist leaders, fighting against the powerful, oppressive British Empire, despite all odds. Bidyunmala, Joubonoshree, Rangana and Rutta are the wives and mothers of these men. They were devoted wives, who would wait for their brave husbands for eternity, and bring up sincere and heroic sons, who would protect the glory and power of their paternal line.

### Conclusion:

Engels (1989) has shown how it was men who articulated the "female discourse" within the colonial conflict, where women's interests were secondary. Women's identification with the domestic sphere allowed both Bengali and British men to highlight the need to reform the condition of women when it served their larger political objectives, but to 'exile' women figuratively to their zenana when legislative reforms or feminist activity threatened to conflict with male political or patriarchal rights. The gender politics of the 19th century influenced Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's perception of the Indian past. His historical novels were very popular, and in that capacity had to some extent, shaped the Bengali readers' idea of history and gender identity in the past. The historical novels examined in this paper illustrate how the socio-cultural ambience in which the author wrote influenced his creation; they also reveal that the gender identities and roles depicted in them mirror the cultural norms and gender stereotypes of the author's context.

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<sup>1</sup> Hari Narayan Apte, '*Chandragupta Hindi*', Kamal Prabha Prakashan, Pune, 2012; Harish Chandra Datta, '*Aitihaasik Kahini Somogro*', Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, 2005; Kalki Krishnamurthy, '*Ponniyin Selvan*', Set of all five parts (Tamil), MBF Publisher, Chennai, 2022; K.M.Munshi, '*Gujarat no Nath*', Pravin Prakashan, Gujarat, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay, a contemporary of Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, was an archaeologist by profession who wrote historical fiction as well as many academic works. He wrote several novels — *Pakshantar* (1924), *Byatikram* (1924) and *Anukram* (1931). Three more novels, namely, *Dhruba*, *Karuna* (1917) and *Shashanka* (1914) are set in the different phases of the Gupta period. The setting of his *Pashaner Katha* (1914) is Kushana period, *Dharmapala* (1915) narrates the story of the Pala emperor Dharmapala. *Mayukh* (1916) describes the Portuguese atrocities in Bengal during the reign of Shahjahan, while *Asim* (1924) narrates the condition of Bengal during the reign of Farrukhsiyar. His last novel, *Lutf-Ulla*, is set in Delhi at the time of the invasion by Nadir Shah. Another unfinished work, *Hemkana*, was published in *Prabasi* magazine) from 1911 to 1912. A number of his novels were translated into other Indian languages.

<sup>3</sup> Tapan Sinha, '*Jhinder Bondi*', released on 8th June 1961; Satyajit Ray, '*Chiriakhana*', released on 29th September 1967; Anjan Dutt, '*Byomkesh Bakshi*', released on 13th August 2010.

<sup>4</sup> His short story, '*Pragjyotish*' was based during the Aryan invasions, and another story '*Indratulak*' even before that. '*Adim*' was based in the historical period of ancient Egypt. Some unfolded in the 4th and 5th centuries ('*Amitabho*', '*Bishkanya*' and '*Setu*').



'Rokto Sondha' and 'Chua Chandan' were set in the 15th and 16th centuries. The periods of Islamic rule in India were reflected only in a few of his works, for example, 'Shonkho Konkon' and 'Reba Rodhoshi' (the reign of Alauddin Khilji). Two more were set in the time of Shivaji (*Bagher Bacha*), and Shah Shuja (*Tokt Mobarak*).

<sup>5</sup> See for instance <https://www.getbengal.com/details/saradindu-Bandyopadhyay-not-just-detective-byomkesh-but-a-master-writer-of-historical-novels>

<sup>6</sup> It is a form of marriage mentioned in Hindu mythology where a woman chooses a man as her husband from a group of suitors.

<sup>7</sup> Sumathi Ramaswamy uses this term to refer to the practice of colonial-era, Indian language magazines like *Hindi Punch* to use the female body to represent movements, values, nations depicting them on cartographed bodies, globes and maps.

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## The Role of Education in Empowering Women: An analysis in the context of Indian Society

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### Abstract

Human society, biologically, is divided into two categories, male and female. Though biologically male and female are different, it has been scientifically proven that both of them possess same intellectual capabilities. In Indian Society since ancient period intellectual capabilities of women have been either denied or neglected. Women are restricted to certain social roles by social masters. Since the role of women in Indian society is mainly restricted to take care of family members and nurturing children, their importance is usually confined within the boundaries of family and home.

It has been observed that women's capabilities are often judged from the perspective of their abilities to nurture their families. Thus, in spite of having same intellectual capabilities, society has constructed the gender role of men and women differently. As women are often perceived as care giver, the necessity of their intellectual development through proper education is less emphasized. It has been observed that in rural area or in a poor and lower middle-class family of urban area, the education of female child is considered as less important than a male child. If women are denied proper education, they would not be able to strengthen their economic and social security by themselves. They will also remain ignorant about their equal social rights to men. So, it is important for women to come out of the darkness of ignorance, to establish gender equality. Hence, in this paper I want to shed light on the role of education in eradicating the gender inequality. In this paper my effort would also be to reinvent the truth that only proper education can empower a woman in real sense and help them to gain equal social status with men.

**Keywords:** Women, India, Society, Education, Equality

### Introduction

Since the dawn of the human civilization, male and female have been an integral part of it. However, in the patriarchal structure of the society, women have often remained deprived and tortured by her male counterparts. Patriarchy has shown greater respect to men as the bread earner but at the same time the vital role of women in constructing a healthy society have been forgotten by the social masters. In the patriarchy, the role of women is mainly confined within the boundaries of her family and home. The intellectual capabilities of women are often denied. Women are mainly perceived as a tool of giving birth to a child and nurturing the family members. The independent role of women in the field of economy and politics are not accepted by the social masters.



After the industrial revolution women have come out of the boundaries of their home to ensure livelihood but they faced unequal treatment with men regarding wages<sup>1</sup> (Shefali Maitra, 2003, p21). Frederik Engels in the book 'The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State', had clearly pointed out that the production system in capitalistic society was based upon the division of gender. According to Engels in the capitalistic society, Industries and personal properties are owned by the male. These male owners used to appoint male labour in the industries. Thus, role of women in the production system was ignored and they were considered as a mere tool for obtaining human resources only<sup>2</sup> (Engels 1884; Kalyan kumar Sarkar 2019 p 20). In the eighteenth-century, Mary Wollstonecraft in her book 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' had first protested against the secondary role of women in the society and her confinement within the boundaries of her home<sup>3</sup> (Wollstonecraft 1792; Sarkar 2019 p-21). In the nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill in his individualistic theory of human upliftment had mentioned about the importance of freedom of women from the bondage of male dominance<sup>4</sup> (Sarkar 2019 p-22). French feminist and thinker Simon De Beauvoir in the twentieth century, through her book, 'The Second Sex', had spread awareness among people about the secondary position and deprivation of women in the society<sup>5</sup> (Beauvoir 1949: Sarkar 2019 p-31). This book helped a lot in spreading the awareness about the social and economic rights of women with their male counterparts. Beauvoir's book also helped in assuring the unique position of women in the male-dominated society. Thus, with the help of these thinkers and social reformers the concept of feminism came forth in the European society and ensured the necessity of women empowerment. Later, the concept of feminism through certain evolution has got its present form and vastly affects the human thought process. Hence, we can say that the modern feminism first emerged from the European society and later spread over the whole world.

Feminist movement against gender inequalities took place in two different ways, Liberal and Radical. According to Liberalism, there should be principles or rules independent of gender disparities. On the basis of these principles, gender equalities could be achieved. These kinds of principles must be justified by valid logical argument. They have tried to find out such imperatives which are independent of gender inequalities to establish justice within the society<sup>6</sup> (Shephali Maitra, 2003, p-42). On the other hand, radical feminism had tried to establish gender equalities by spreading awareness against the negative features of patriarchy. According to the radical feminism, gender disparities occur due to the hierarchy system of power. In a patriarchal society, people with more power to fulfill their self-interests have kept women deprived of all justice. Liberal feminism put emphasis upon the individual existence of each and every woman, whereas radical feminism conceptualized women as being related to all other persons in society. According to them, in spite of being related to others, women can raise their voice in support of individual demands.<sup>7</sup> (Shephali Maitra, 2003, p 48)

In India traditionally, women are confined within the boundaries of home and family. It could be said that the position of women in the Indian society went through several changes. In the early Vedic age women in India were equally treated with their male counterparts. Women usually got the opportunity for proper education during that time. They also got the scope of making independent social and economic decisions along with men. It has been observed that during ancient period marriage was not considered as the one and only goal of women. Women could remain unmarried as per their wish. Even if a woman wanted to get married, she could choose her life partner independently. Freedom enjoyed by women in the early Vedic age got restricted later on. Since the time of later Vedic age, women started to lose their freedom of getting education and making decisions of their own due to male dominance. Middle age, under the authority of Muslims, could be considered as the dark era for Indian women. As mentioned by Rukhsana Iftikhar, "Indian women faced many miseries in the form of customs, traditions and taboos of the society. But in the social,



cultural and political matters they had an equivalent share before the establishment of Turkish rule in India”<sup>8</sup> (Iftikhar, 2016, p 17).

According to Ruksana Iftikar, several reasons were responsible for the decline in the position of women in India. Gender division in the field of agricultural labour forced women to be left behind men. Male dominance in agricultural as well as industrial production was a pertinent factor of gender inequality. Gradually restrictions were also made for women regarding the personal ownership of wealth due to this societal hierarchy. In the Muslim era, different social sanctions were imposed upon the women, which led to their inferior position in the society<sup>9</sup> (Iftikhar, 2016, p 18).

In the British era, the position of women in society remained unchanged, though during the independence movement women took active part against British colonialism. During the period of nineteenth and twentieth centuries, some social reformers had tried to free women from different societal rigidity but constructive movement to establish gender equality was not initiated by them. The importance of economic and social independence of women were ignored by the societal system of that time. During the period of British colonialism, social reformers protested against several Hindu customs which were alarming for women, but they did not initiate any movement in support of overall freedom of women from gender hierarchy. After Independence, Indian Constitution ensured the ideologies of Democracy, Socialism and Secularism but social inequalities in the name of Gender remained unchanged. Though in the Indian constitution Article 14 and 15 state the equal legal treatment for men and women, these laws failed to bring any visible changes in the patriarchal structure of society. In modern times, due to the development of communication technology we easily come to know about the atrocities against women, so that different female communities could initiate movements against those incidents. Modern Indian society also considered the issue of women empowerment with great importance, but it could be said that even in the post-modern period, Gender equality in all spheres of society is yet to be achieved.

In this paper my aim is to analyze the Role of education in women empowerment since proper education can help a woman to realise the power of her inner self. Hence, to diminish the patriarchal structure of society each and every Indian woman’s demand of getting educated must be fulfilled. In this context discussion would also be made on the present situation of female literacy in India. India is worshiped as Holy mother but the position of women in this country is getting worse day by day. This contradictory situation could be resolved only by spreading awareness about the importance of treating men and women equally. Hence, this paper will also try to shed light on the significance of education to spread awareness about the inclusive treatment to both male and female.

### Objective of Paper

The role of education in human civilization is very important. Education used to enrich us by providing information regarding different fields of studies. Education is also helpful in uplifting the moral valuation of human beings. Proper education helps a person to become aware of the strength of inner self and enables him or her to differentiate between right and wrong. In modern days significance of proper education is confined within the boundaries of livelihood but its relevance is very deep rooted. So, the objective of this paper is to find out how proper education could be relevant in empowering women, besides it being a lucrative option. Another objective of this article is to shed light on the fact that negative perspectives of gender role could be eradicated only by spreading awareness through education. The aim of this article is to show that gender stereotype is harmful both for men and women.



## Research Methodology

This article is mainly based upon analysis of secondary data about feminism and women empowerment. Secondary data are collected from different books and online Journal articles. The views of famous socialist Kamla Bhasin on Gender have also taken care of in this paper. Different Government data are collected from several websites to show the present societal situation of the women in India.

## Different stages of Women Education in India

In India, Women's right to education has gone through different phases. In the early Vedic Age women belonged to the higher state. During that time women had their independent identity. Most of the women used to get the opportunity of education. They could take part in the Brahminic rituals also. Some women during that time were known as '*Brahmagyani*'. Marriage was not considered as the only destiny of women. Women could live a life of their own choice. So, women did not need to get married at an early age. They could have enough time to complete their education first. In early Vedic age, educated women also got higher respect in the society.

This scenario of the early Vedic age started to change in the later Vedic age, which was considered as age of '*Manu*'. According to the principles of Manu, women should be confined within the boundaries of home and family. In this age Women were deprived from participation and performing religious rituals. Women's right to education was denied in the principles of Manu. Women were instructed to live under the dominance of her father or husband or son. Women in this age lost their own social and economic identity. According to Manu's principles, the age of the marriage of women fell to 10 or 11. For this reason women education lost its importance.

In Buddhist age, women were denied renunciation by Lord Buddha, but afterwards on the request of his disciple Ananda and his aunt Gautami he accepted the proposal. Though Buddha accepted the participation of women as '*Vikshuni*' in his *samgha*, they had to follow strict principles in buddhist monasteries. According to the instructions of Buddha, women had to complete their education under a '*Vikshu*', who under the watch of superior '*Vikshu*' could deliver his lecture to women disciples<sup>10</sup> (Chattopadhyay, Sengupta, 2021, p12). Besides this, women of the '*Vikshuni Samgha*' had to follow certain principles, like not living with Buddhist monk, avoiding male touch, not roaming alone, not crossing river, not hiding sin<sup>11</sup> (Chattopadhyay, Sengupta, 2021, p 13). In spite of strict restrictions, many Buddhist nuns revealed their creativity through unique write-ups. '*Therigatha*', the famous write up of that time, comprises spiritualistic revelation of buddhist nun. The name of some nun could be mentioned here, who lived a spiritual life by maintaining celibacy throughout their lives. They are Bishakha, Subha, Anupama, Sumedha, etc <sup>12</sup> (Chattopadhyay, Sengupta, 2021, pg 13). In Buddhist age, women were considered to be in the lower strata of society but their position was better than the Brahminic Age.

In the middle age under the authority of Islam, women education was neglected and sometimes denied due to the rituals of '*Purdah*'. However, in some aristocratic families, women got the opportunity to learn Islamic religious rituals. Since during this period several social sanctions were imposed upon women, they were forced to live under siege within the boundaries of their family. In this age women of specific society got fame as poet and writer but education of common women was neglected due to certain religious superstitions and social sanctions.



In the British era, the progression of women education took place under the Charter Act (1813)<sup>13</sup> (Chattopadhyay, Sengupta, 2021, p 16). In this era with the help of Thomas Babington Macaulay, Lord William Bentinck and Raja Rammohan Roy, women education got back its importance in the Indian society. In 1850 Lord Dalhousie also encouraged and supported the issue of women education. Due to his encouragement, in 1854 Wood's dispatch came to the fore --- 2600 primary schools, 81 secondary schools and 15 teacher training centre for women were established within 1870 to 1882<sup>14</sup> (Chattopadhyay, Sengupta, 2021, p 17).

In 1882-83 Hunter Commission had recommended some provisions regarding women education. In the British era, women got the opportunity to study medical science too. In 1904 Lord Curzon approved Government grant for women education. In this year Annie Besant established 'Central Hindu Girls' College' in Varanasi<sup>15</sup> (Chattopadhyay, Sengupta, 2021, p 18). The period between 1921 to 1947 could be considered as important phase for women education. During this period, under the influence of Nationalist movements and first World War, awareness regarding the importance of women education spread all over India.

After independence people of India started to take more interest about women education. During 1948 to 1949, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan restructured the education system of Universities and recommended new provisions for the betterment of education system. During this period the issue of women education got much importance. The Government of India constructed a committee for women education under the supervision of Smt Durgabai Deshmukh<sup>16</sup> (Chattopadhyay, Sengupta, 2021, p 20). Different committees for women welfare started to spread awareness regarding the necessity of women education even in the rural areas. The Government of India constructed a commission under the supervision of Dr. D.S Kothari to identify the obstacles of education system. This commission was known as Kothari Commission and provided recommendations to improve women education during that time. In 1971 'Committee on the status of women' had been constructed on the collaborative effort of both Social welfare and Education Ministries. Dr. Phul Renu Guha was selected as the chairperson of this committee<sup>17</sup> (Chattopadhyay, Sengupta, 2021, p 22). In 2001, SSA or Sarva Siksha Abhiyan started to ensure elementary education for all. The aim of SSA was to provide basic or elementary education to all Indian citizens between the age group of 6 to 14, within the year 2010.

Nowadays women have become more aware about the importance of education. Modern women have realized that education is the only weapon with the help of which they can attain freedom from the dominance of patriarchy. The Indian Government has taken several initiatives to enhance the female literacy rate. As per a report published in the internet edition of a renowned newspaper, presently, the female literacy rate in India has increased up to 68% since independence (18) (Hindustan Times 15 March 2023).

### **Different Concepts of Education and its Role in Women Empowerment**

Education plays an important role in empowering women. Proper education can ensure both the internal and external development of human beings. Education can show a way of light to overcome the darkness of ignorance. It can enhance the moral values within us. Proper education can broaden the mind set of human beings to overcome all kinds of meanness to others. In this context two perspectives of education could be mentioned here- 1) Broad and 2) Narrow. In the narrower sense, education helps us to gather information regarding different fields of study. In this sense the method of education often conceived as formal instructions are provided by teachers in different schools, colleges and Universities. In the narrower sense, education is considered as the medium of getting higher degrees to achieve livelihood. But in the broader sense, the scope of education is not exhausted within the limits of getting higher degrees and attractive livelihoods, rather it helps to develop both the outer and inner personality of human beings. In broader sense, education helps people to get a balanced personality. In this sense education could be a source of holistic development of



human beings which will help people to understand their strength of inner self and can show a way towards the path of humanity. If a state is to reach the pinnacle of human development, it must ensure equal access of education to all its citizens.

In a patriarchal society, women are often deprived of proper education. But women education is necessary to eradicate illiteracy in an absolute sense. Since women used to take care of children within the family, if she became educated, she could make her children aware of the importance of education in life. It can be said that to educate a woman means to educate a Nation.

Education can be imparted in informal or formal or non-formal way. Since childhood people learn several things, which is considered as informal ways of learning. People used to put much emphasis upon formal education though the lessons a child gets from the surrounding society and family have a great influence on life.

The method of formal education comprises specific curriculum, boundaries of class rooms, and specific teaching and learning methods whereas non-formal education is freed of certain restrictions of formal education. The non-formal educational institutes used to follow flexible curriculum which could be followed by all. The names of some non-formal educational institutes are IGNOU, NSOU etc. In these educational institutes people can get education at any time and at any age. These institutes also conduct distance education which is very much useful for people who live in rural and remote areas. In non-formal ways of education, seminars, workshops, TV and radio broadcast, Social media and Print media could also play an important role to educate people about the positive and inclusive ways of life.

Education either informal or formal or non-formal, play an important role in women empowerment. Since childhood girls should be educated about getting equal importance in the society through their family members. Family members should take the responsibility to make a girl child aware about the importance of education instead of getting married, so that the rate of child marriage and early marriage could be prevented. Education will enable women to take decisions regarding the right time of marriage and conception. In India conception at an early age is often responsible for the mortality of both young mother and child. Through proper education women could be made aware about the importance of taking care of her health and hygiene also.

Education can also enable women to take part in the economic development of a state. Formal method of education plays an important role to make a woman economically independent. Formal education can also make women aware about her social, political and economic rights. Indian Constitution ensures certain rights to women along with men. These rights are, right to get education, right to health and hygiene, right to vote, right to employment, right to get equal salary and wages and many more. Women cannot exercise these rights without proper education. Several Acts which have been passed in the Parliament in support of women empowerment, can also be mentioned here, Special marriage Act (1954), The Hindu Marriage Act (1955), The Hindu Succession Act (1956), The Suppression of immoral traffic of women and girl Act (1956), The Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), The Maternity Benefit Act (1961), The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act (1971), The Equal Remuneration Act (1976), The Criminal Law Amendment Act (1983) and Domestic Violence Act (2005)<sup>18</sup> ( Halder, 2021, p 199). Besides these Acts, some Articles and government policies could also be mentioned, which are beneficiaries of women Empowerment.

Article 16 has ensured the Equality of Opportunity in matters of Public Employment while Article 42, which holds that the State shall make provisions for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity



relief. National Education Policy of 2020 aims to bring transformational reforms in schools and higher education systems including universalization of education. The Indian Government has passed Acts to ensure the physical safety of women against sexual harassment in workplace also (2013) --- Criminal Amendment Act in 2013 was renamed, Nirbhaya Act to protect women from rape <sup>19</sup> (Women's Rights in India, National Human Rights Commission) The Central Government has introduced several schemes like *Beti bachao Beti padao*, *Pradhanmantri Matru Vandana Yojna*, *Kishori Shakti Yojna*, *Haryana Kanya Kosh* etc, to ensure not only the empowerment of women but these schemes also take care of women education. In West Bengal Chief Minister Smt.Mamata Bandopadhyay has also introduced certain schemes to prevent school dropouts among women. Those schemes are *Kanyasree Prakalpo*, *Rupasree Prakalpo* etc. In West Bengal, the state Government has started *laxmi Bhander Prakalp* to ensure the economic liberty of under privileged women. The women from unprivileged sector can take advantages of these Government schemes to complete their education. There are several Government and Non-Government institutes of non-formal education which would also be helpful to increase the rate of women literacy. Since these kinds of institutes are offering distant education with flexible curriculum, the women from rural and remote areas can complete basic education to make themselves socially aware and independent.

Proper education can enable women to understand the significance of women empowerment. Education can help women to realise that male subordination is not her destiny, rather she can achieve freedom from all oppressions by themselves. In this post-modern era, formal education can help women to secure leading positions in the fields of politics, economics, sports, literature, science, technology. The name of some famous women who have made a distinct position in India could be mentioned here, Ms. Pratibha Patil, Ms. Draupadi Murmu, Ms Sania Mirza, Ms. Arundhuti Roy, Ms. Jhulan Goswami, Ms..Nirmala Sitaram, Ms.Medha Patkar and many more.

### Significance of Gender equality in Indian society

The three ideologies present behind Indian Democratic Government, are, Independence, Equality and Fraternity. Among these features of Democratic ideals, the most important one is the ideal of equality. This ideal of equality is conceived in the absolute sense for India. It has been stated in the Constitution of India that all Indian citizens should be treated equally, irrespective of class, caste, creed and gender, so that holistic development of human society could be achieved. The present scenario of Indian society differs from this view. Though the position of women in India has improved in some respect, till date women have not been getting equal respect like men. In the post-modern era, a superficial improvement of the position of women is seen everywhere, but in the true sense, the attitude of Indian society towards women remains unchanged. Even in this post-modern period male child are more wanted in the family than female child. The incidents of female foeticide are still happening though the rate differs in different states. It has been observed that this rate is higher in the states like Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujrat. Due to the higher rate of female foeticide, the sex ratio in India also suffers. According to National census held in 2011, only 914 females exist for every 1000 male. Due to this higher rate of female foeticide, India will be going to face bridal crisis when it comes to marriage very soon. Indian Government implemented PNDA Act to prevent female foeticide in 1994. But this Act failed to prevent the decline in the sex ratio. So, this Act was Amended in 2003. But till date several illegal process of sex determination and abortion are still happening in our country. Even in this post-modern era, women are regarded as commodity of sexual enjoyment only. Often the sexual consent of women is ignored and sexual relationship with her is made forcibly. The incidents of rape and juvenile assaults are increasing day by day. Women are thus denied of the ownership of her body also. Several incidents of heinous crime against women could be mentioned here --- 2012 Delhi gang rape, which was known as Nirbhaya case



later on, the sexual assaults of Manipuri native women, and recent incident of rape and murder case of an intern Doctor of R.G Kar Hospital in West Bengal. All these incidents are indicating that though Indian men used to worship different goddesses, in reality, they lack of showing proper respect and care to women. Women are often glorified as mother, sister and daughter but they are facing humiliation, both in the public and private spheres. In this respect it could be concluded that Indian society is maintaining a double standard regarding the attitude towards women.

India is planning to reach 16 sustainable goals within 2030, among which 5<sup>th</sup> SDG is gender equality. The Indian Government has decided to fulfill certain targets to reach the goal of gender equality. The focus of these targets is mainly on showing non-discriminative attitude towards women and girls, eliminating all forms of violence against women, ensuring equal access to technology of information and communication to promote women empowerment, encouraging woman's leadership in the field of economy and politics, etc. But to fulfill these targets the patriarchal mindset of Indian people need to be changed. Unequal treatments to women give rise to different social conflicts also, which in course of time serve as a hindrance towards the prosperity of the state. If India wants to achieve a holistic development of society, the improvement of the societal, economic and political position of women through adequate system of education is needed.

### Conclusion

Since eighteenth century women have protested against their deprivation in the male dominated society but these movements were not structured properly. In twentieth century these movements became much more organised. Since 1970 a whole new theoretical discussion called 'Feminism' which was exclusively about women's demand, came to the forefront<sup>1</sup> (Shephali Maitra, 2003, p21). The main source of women deprivation is discriminating treatment regarding gender identity. In the human society each and every person bear their sexual and gender identities. Sexual identity of male and female are determined by nature, but their gender identity is determined by social order. It has been observed that most of the time the gender identity of male and female is constructed in accordance with their natural qualities. Male persons by nature are aggressive, strong, rigid, whereas females are much more compassionate, flexible and possess a careful nature. These natural differences between male and female influence a lot in constructing their gender role. Men are assumed as capable of working outside and women are confined within the boundaries of family. With the progression of time, women started to protest against this over simplified construction of gender role. They have come forward with the demand of economic independence along with men. When women started to seek their economic independence along with their male counterparts, they also started to realize the importance of getting proper education. Women faced several unequal treatments from society while demanding their right to get education. Since long society could not accept women's intellectual existence besides men, but nowadays several feminist movements have helped women to become economically, socially and politically independent through proper education.

The approaches of two types of feminist movements, as mentioned earlier, were different but the main goal of these two approaches were to ensure the freedom of women from the shackles of male dominance. In this respect the concept of women empowerment came to the fore to ensure their holistic development. This theory does not put emphasis only on the economic development of women, rather wants to ensure economic as well as social and political developments too. Hence, it could be said that the broader perspective of education could be more effective than narrow perspective in empowering women.

Women empowerment and feminism are interlinked in conceptualizing women as leading performers in the fields of education, culture, science, religion, politics, entrepreneurship and administration. Women



empowerment could be considered as the end and Feminism and Feminist movements are the means to achieve this end. Through a holistic system of education women could be made aware about their economic, political and psychological capacities. Empowering women through proper education can ensure their freedom of thought, so that they can make decisions surrounding their life by themselves. Educational method, which can enlighten women from within, can show a way towards self-independence. Self-independent women can realize in the true sense the value of getting freedom from patriarchal system of society.

Feminism has tried to introduce a new concept of gender role and has protested against all kinds of gender stereotype. In our society the gender roles of male and female are conceived in a specific way and violation of this fixed way is not accepted. Since feminism has protested against this specific role of men and women, the conflict with the prevailing rules of society has become obvious. Feminism by protesting against any kind of gender stereotypes has reconstructed the gender role of both men and women. Feminism is not about any hierarchal theory of power, rather it puts emphasis upon the absolute equality of all human beings. This theory has tried to view the gender role in a reverse manner.

Traditional social values have envisioned men and women as possessing certain nature and any opposition to it is not accepted by Indian society. For this reason, women with masculinity and men with femininity are condemned by society. The sexual orientation of humans is also specified by social order. Heterosexuality is accepted by the society, whereas homosexuality is not. Feminism discusses the rights of all these categories of human society. Feminism has shown respect to all kinds of perspectives of an individual. This kind of inclusivity is not only necessary for the freedom of women but for all those individuals who wants to live a life of their own way. This theory does not judge individuals from the perspective of any pre-established societal rules, rather it accepts all humans independent of any social norms and rules. This kind of humanitarian attitude is very much useful to prosper in a positive way.

For India, to reach the sustainable goals, equal opportunities should be provided to all. Gender equality will not be achieved if opportunities are denied to the specific section of human society. As a part of human society all are equally entitled to live a worthwhile life. An adequate system of education can make people aware about the values of human lives. It is not enough for women or any downtrodden section of society to gain only economic liberty to bring changes in the patriarchal structure of society. People with the help of education should strengthen their inner power to become self-resilient. Women empowerment is not enough to ensure the freedom of women, rather individual vision towards gender role should be changed. Modern perspectives of gender role can pave the way towards absolute freedom from patriarchy for all downtrodden sections of society along with women. A proper educational method can only make people aware about the positivity of feminist approach. So lastly it could be concluded that without the holistic method of education gender equality is difficult to achieve in Indian society.

Human Rights Commission). The Central Government has introduced several schemes like, *Beti bachao Beti padao*, *Pradhanmantri Matru Vandana Yojna*, *Kishori Shakti Yojna*, *Haryana Kanya Kosh* etc, to ensure not only the empowerment of women but these schemes also take care of women education. In West Bengal Chief Minister Smt.Mamata Bandopadhyay has also introduced certain schemes to prevent school dropouts among women. Those schemes are *Kanyasree Prakalpo*, *Rupasree Prakalpo* etc. In West Bengal, the state Government has started *laxmi Bhander Prakalp* to ensure the economic liberty of under privileged women. The women from unprivileged sector can take advantages of these Government schemes to complete their education. There are several Government and Non-Government institutes of non-formal education which would also be helpful to increase the rate of women literacy. Since these kinds of institutes are offering distant education with flexible



curriculum, the women from rural and remote areas can complete basic education to make themselves socially aware and independent.

Proper education can enable women to understand the significance of women empowerment. Education can help women to realise that male subordination is not her destiny, rather she can achieve freedom from all oppressions by themselves. In this post-modern era, formal education can help women to secure leading positions in the fields of politics, economics, sports, literature, science, technology. The name of some famous women who have made a distinct position in India could be mentioned here, Ms. Pratibha Patil, Ms. Draupadi Murmu, Ms. Sania Mirza, Ms. Arundhuti Roy, Ms. Jhulan Goswami, Ms. Nirmla Sitaram, Ms. Medha Patkar and many more.

### Significance of Gender equality in Indian society

The three ideologies present behind Indian Democratic Government, are, Independence, Equality and Fraternity. Among these features of Democratic ideals, the most important one is the ideal of equality. This ideal of equality is conceived in the absolute sense for India. It has been stated in the Constitution of India that all Indian citizens should be treated equally, irrespective of class, caste, creed and gender, so that holistic development of human society could be achieved. The present scenario of Indian society differs from this view. Though the position of women in India has improved in some respect, till date women have not been getting equal respect like men. In the post-modern era, a superficial improvement of the position of women is seen everywhere, but in the true sense, the attitude of Indian society towards women remains unchanged. Even in this post-modern period male child are more wanted in the family than female child. The incidents of female foeticide are still happening though the rate differs in different states. It has been observed that this rate is higher in the states like Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujrat. Due to the higher rate of female foeticide, the sex ratio in India also suffers. According to National census held in 2011, only 914 females exist for every 1000 male. Due to this higher rate of female foeticide, India will be going to face bridal crisis when it comes to marriage very soon. Indian Government implemented PNDT Act to prevent female foeticide in 1994. But this Act failed to prevent the decline in the sex ratio. So, this Act was Amended in 2003. But till date several illegal process of sex determination and abortion are still happening in our country. Even in this post-modern era, women are regarded as commodity of sexual enjoyment only. Often the sexual consent of women is ignored and sexual relationship with her is made forcibly. The incidents of rape and juvenile assaults are increasing day by day. Women are thus denied of the ownership of her body also. Several incidents of heinous crime against women could be mentioned here --- 2012 Delhi gang rape, which was known as Nirbhaya case later on, the sexual assaults of Manipuri native women, and recent incident of rape and murder case of an intern Doctor of R.G Kar Hospital in West Bengal. All these incidents are indicating that though Indian men used to worship different goddesses, in reality, they lack of showing proper respect and care to women. Women are often glorified as mother, sister and daughter but they are facing humiliation, both in the public and private spheres. In this respect it could be concluded that Indian society is maintaining a double standard regarding the attitude towards women.

India is planning to reach 16 sustainable goals within 2030, among which 5<sup>th</sup> SDG is gender equality. The Indian Government has decided to fulfill certain targets to reach the goal of gender equality. The focus of these targets is mainly on showing non-discriminative attitude towards women and girls, eliminating all forms of violence against women, ensuring equal access to technology of information and communication to promote women empowerment, encouraging woman's leadership in the field of economy and politics, etc. But to fulfill these targets the patriarchal mindset of Indian people need to be changed. Unequal treatments to women give



rise to different social conflicts also, which in course of time serve as a hindrance towards the prosperity of the state. If India wants to achieve a holistic development of society, the improvement of the societal, economic and political position of women through adequate system of education is needed.

## Conclusion

Since eighteenth century women have protested against their deprivation in the male dominated society but these movements were not structured properly. In twentieth century these movements became much more organised. Since 1970 a whole new theoretical discussion called 'Feminism' which was exclusively about women's demand, came to the forefront<sup>1</sup> (Shephali Maitra, 2003, 21). The main source of women deprivation is discriminating treatment regarding gender identity. In the human society each and every person bear their sexual and gender identities. Sexual identity of male and female are determined by nature, but their gender identity is determined by social order. It has been observed that most of the time the gender identity of male and female is constructed in accordance with their natural qualities. Male persons by nature are aggressive, strong, rigid, whereas females are much more compassionate, flexible and possess a careful nature. These natural differences between male and female influence a lot in constructing their gender role. Men are assumed as capable of working outside and women are confined within the boundaries of family. With the progression of time, women started to protest against this over simplified construction of gender role. They have come forward with the demand of economic independence along with men. When women started to seek their economic independence along with their male counterparts, they also started to realize the importance of getting proper education. Women faced several unequal treatments from society while demanding their right to get education. Since long society could not accept women's intellectual existence besides men, but nowadays several feminist movements have helped women to become economically, socially and politically independent through proper education.

The approaches of two types of feminist movements, as mentioned earlier, were different but the main goal of these two approaches were to ensure the freedom of women from the shackles of male dominance. In this respect the concept of women empowerment came to the fore to ensure their holistic development. This theory does not put emphasis only on the economic development of women, rather wants to ensure economic as well as social and political developments too. Hence, it could be said that the broader perspective of education could be more effective than narrow perspective in empowering women.

Women empowerment and feminism are interlinked in conceptualizing women as leading performers in the fields of education, culture, science, religion, politics, entrepreneurship and administration. Women empowerment could be considered as the end and Feminism and Feminist movements are the means to achieve this end. Through a holistic system of education women could be made aware about their economic, political and psychological capacities. Empowering women through proper education can ensure their freedom of thought, so that they can make decisions surrounding their life by themselves. Educational method, which can enlighten women from within, can show a way towards self-independence. Self-independent women can realize in the true sense the value of getting freedom from patriarchal system of society.

Feminism has tried to introduce a new concept of gender role and has protested against all kinds of gender stereotype. In our society the gender roles of male and female are conceived in a specific way and violation of this fixed way is not accepted. Since feminism has protested against this specific role of men and women, the conflict with the prevailing rules of society has become obvious. Feminism by protesting against any kind of gender stereotypes has reconstructed the gender role of both men and women. Feminism is not about any



hierarchical theory of power, rather it puts emphasis upon the absolute equality of all human beings. This theory has tried to view the gender role in a reverse manner.

Traditional social values have envisioned men and women as possessing certain nature and any opposition to it is not accepted by Indian society. For this reason, women with masculinity and men with femininity are condemned by society. The sexual orientation of humans is also specified by social order. Heterosexuality is accepted by the society, whereas homosexuality is not. Feminism discusses the rights of all these categories of human society. Feminism has shown respect to all kinds of perspectives of an individual. This kind of inclusivity is not only necessary for the freedom of women but for all those individuals who want to live a life of their own way. This theory does not judge individuals from the perspective of any pre-established societal rules, rather it accepts all humans independent of any social norms and rules. This kind of humanitarian attitude is very much useful to prosper in a positive way.

For India, to reach the sustainable goals, equal opportunities should be provided to all. Gender equality will not be achieved if opportunities are denied to the specific section of human society. As a part of human society all are equally entitled to live a worthwhile life. An adequate system of education can make people aware about the values of human lives. It is not enough for women or any downtrodden section of society to gain only economic liberty to bring changes in the patriarchal structure of society. People with the help of education should strengthen their inner power to become self-resilient. Women empowerment is not enough to ensure the freedom of women, rather individual vision towards gender role should be changed. Modern perspectives of gender role can pave the way towards absolute freedom from patriarchy for all downtrodden sections of society along with women. A proper educational method can only make people aware about the positivity of feminist approach. So lastly it could be concluded that without the holistic method of education gender equality is difficult to achieve in Indian society.

<sup>1</sup> Maitra Shephali (November 2003) "Noitikota o Nareebad", New Age Publishers Pvt Ltd, Kolkata, p-21

<sup>2</sup> Sarkar Kumar Kalyan (2019) "Nareebad o Linga Rajneeti o Nareer Khomotayon", Aveneel Press, Kolkata, p-20

<sup>3</sup> Sarkar Kumar Kalyan (2019) "Nareebad o Linga Rajneeti o Nareer Khomotayon", Aveneel Press, Kolkata, p-21

<sup>4</sup> Sarkar Kumar Kalyan (2019) "Nareebad o Linga Rajneeti o Nareer Khomotayon", Aveneel Press, Kolkata, p-22

<sup>5</sup> Sarkar Kumar Kalyan (2019) "Nareebad o Linga Rajneeti o Nareer Khomotayon", Aveneel Press, Kolkata, p-31

<sup>6</sup> Maitra Shephali (November 2003) "Noitikota o Nareebad", New Age Publishers Pvt Ltd, Kolkata p-42

<sup>7</sup> Maitra Shephali (November 2003) "Noitikota o Nareebad", New Age Publishers Pvt Ltd, Kolkata p-48

<sup>8</sup> Iftikhar Rukhsana (2016) "Indian Feminism", Notion Press, Chennai, p-17

<sup>9</sup> Iftikhar Rukhsana (2016) "Indian Feminism", Notion Press, Chennai, p-18

<sup>10</sup> Chattopadhyay Kumar Mihir & Sengupta Madhumala (April 2021), "Naree Shiksha", Rita Publication, Kolkata, p-12

<sup>11</sup> Chattopadhyay Kumar Mihir & Sengupta Madhumala (April 2021), "Naree Shiksha", Rita Publication, Kolkata, p-13

<sup>12</sup> Chattopadhyay Kumar Mihir & Sengupta Madhumala (April 2021), "Naree Shiksha", Rita Publication, Kolkata, p-13

<sup>13</sup> Chattopadhyay Kumar Mihir & Sengupta Madhumala (April 2021), "Naree Shiksha", Rita Publication, Kolkata, p-16

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<sup>15</sup> Chattopadhyay Kumar Mihir & Sengupta Madhumala (April 2021), "Naree Shiksha", Rita Publication, Kolkata, p-18

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<sup>17</sup> Chattopadhyay Kumar Mihir & Sengupta Madhumala (April 2021), "Naree Shiksha", Rita Publication, Kolkata, p-22



<sup>18</sup> Halder Chaitali (September 2021) "Role of Education in the Empowerment of Women" in 'Women Education and Empowerment, Indian Perspective' (Ed) Dr. Birajlaxmi Ghosh, Dr. Shyamsundar Bairagya, Prof. Jayanta Mete, INSC International Publishers, Karnataka p-199

<sup>19</sup> Women's Rights in India: An analytical Study (2021), National Human Rights Commission, New Delhi <https://nhrc.nic.in>

<sup>xx</sup> Maitra Shephali(November 2003) "Noitikota o Nareebad", New Age Publishers Pvt Ltd, Kolkata, p-21

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## Perspectives of Equity in School Education

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### Abstract

Equity in education is to provide fair and inclusive opportunities for all students to help them achieve their fullest educational potential irrespective of their background or characteristics. Its target is to make sure that every student can avail the necessary resources, support, and quality education to flourish academically and personally. Equity identifies the diversified needs of the students and recognizes that they may require different levels of assistance and intervention to prosper in their learning journey. In this context, the present paper makes an attempt to explain the term 'equity' in education and the principles of equity. It also discusses the role of equity in school education, barriers to educational equity and the strategies to promote educational equity. The researcher has adopted qualitative research method. Dissertations, e-journals, e-books, and e-articles etc. have been thoroughly reviewed as secondary sources of data. NEP 2020 visualizes that every student will achieve his full potential and succeed academically and personally if educational equity is ensured in school education.

*Keywords: Equity, principles, barriers, strategies*

### Introduction

An efficient education system accommodates students from diverse backgrounds- irrespective of their economic status, race, family history, or other variances. In such an education system, every student is provided with equal opportunities to access the support and resources available for their education. This fundamental concept carries the spirit of equity in education.

Education is a fundamental right for every child. All students need and deserve the opportunity to build their career in a congenial environment. With the introduction of educational technology, stakeholders find it challenging to offer a suitable learning environment to all learners. But providing a suitable learning environment with equitable access to education is presently the need at the global level.

### Objectives

The objective of the present paper are as follows:

- (i) to explain the term 'equity' in education;
- (ii) to explain the principles of equity;



- (iii) to discuss the role of equity in school education;
- (iv) to find out the barriers to educational equity; and
- (v) to suggest strategies to promote educational equity.

### Understanding Equity

The term 'Equity' relates to gender, race, poverty, and disability. It explains the conception of fairness, specifically most disadvantaged sets or communities in respect of education. WHO defines equity from the social perspective and considers it as "the absences of avoidable or remediable differences among groups of people".

The phrase 'equity in education' is complicated and can be explained from various angles, making it difficult to find a concise definition. Basically, equity in education or educational equity is the task of creating an educational system that provides service to students of all kinds and develops their educational experience accordingly. Equity in education is to create a teaching environment that caters to an individual student. In an equitable educational environment, all students can access the resources and support they need so that they can achieve their learning goals. This means that irrespective of a student's gender, background, language, race, socio-economic status, learning capability, disability, or family history, every student has the opportunity to receive that support and resources that are required for them to achieve their educational goals.

There are two dimensions of equity in education.

- (i) Fairness- It is making sure that personal and social background, for example, gender, socio-economic status, ethnic origin should not serve as an obstacle in achieving educational potential.
- (ii) Inclusion- It is ensuring a basic minimum standard of education for all.

Thus, in general equity means providing all the necessities to deserving candidates to get equal outcomes. Equity in the field of education can be explained as-

- (i) Access to school
- (ii) Opportunity to legally recognized right
- (iii) Treatment of educational models and measures
- (iv) Result of opportunity for success

While the terms 'equity' and 'equality' are often used interchangeably, there are prominent differences between them. 'Equality' means offering all students with the same educational opportunities throughout their entire scholastic career. However, this approach does not take into account that with those opportunities, each student may have different needs to reach their targets. 'Equity', on the other hand, involves establishing a level playing field across the classroom, taking student opportunities and infusing them with support and resources personalized to each student. This means that disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students experience the same quality of education even though they may have different learning needs. Equity aims to boost disadvantaged students and ensure that they are presented with the same options as others, making up



the differences for these disadvantaged students. Equality focuses on the group, while equity focuses on individuals. Equality is based on a generic, one-size-fits-all approach while equity is adaptable.

### Principles of Equity

UNESCO has emphasised on five principles which can guide to measure equity in learning and education. These are Meritocracy, Minimum Standards, Impartiality, Equality of Condition, and Redistribution. Meritocracy means the opportunities provided on the basis of the merit of the students. Merit is considered to be the academic performance of the students and not the age-old idea of inherited merit. Minimum standard refers to the criteria that defines basic measure of equity. This includes whether the child has been enrolled in the school, the retention level, the literacy level etc. Impartiality is measured by the differences in educational access and outcomes with respect to gender, locale, ethnicity, and economic background of the learners. The aim of school education is to reduce these differences so that educational equity can be achieved. These impartiality goals are the yardsticks of ensuring minimum standards. Equality of condition is also significant in ensuring equity in education. UNESCO highlights that quality of condition depends on the distribution of the variable across children, regardless of their circumstances. For example, if we look at the number of years of education received and plot a graph, starting with those who have the least education and ending with those who have the most, we will find that flatter the line, greater the equality of condition. Such measures require only one variable and shows equity indicators that are comparable over time and between countries. The principle of redistribution emphasises that distribution of inputs has to be uneven so as to ensure and compensate the existing inequality. This unequal distribution of inputs leads to differential treatment of the stakeholders in education.

Maiztegui-Onate and Santibanez-Grubber (2008) highlighted three principles of equity which are as follows-

- (i) Horizontal equity- It is equality of treatment for those who start from the same point
- (ii) Vertical equity- It is the series of compensatory measures directed toward minority groups or toward groups at risk of disadvantage (for example, women, ethnic minorities or the less affluent social classes), and
- (iii) Equal education opportunity- It is the series of initiatives designed to ensure that everyone has the equal opportunities for success, starting from different conditions and resources.

### Role of Equity in School Education

Equity in school education plays a primary role in bringing fairness, social justice, and equal opportunities for all students in the educational system. Some key roles of equity in education are:

- **Fairness in Access to Education:** Equity ensures that all students have equitable access to quality education, irrespective of their background, personal characteristics, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, etc. It helps to remove barriers for the disadvantaged students so that they can access educational opportunities. It is important to provide targeted support to the deprived students so that every student has an equal chance to succeed academically.
- **Closing Achievement Gaps:** Equity in education highlights on minimising and ultimately closing achievement gaps between various student groups.



- **Diversity and Inclusivity:** Equity fosters a diverse and inclusive learning environment where each and every student feel valued, respected, and represented. It recognizes and celebrates the diversified backgrounds with which students come to the educational set up.
- **Addressing Systemic Inequalities:** Equity in education addresses systemic inequalities in the field of education. It promotes for fair distribution of resources, funding, and support system for all students.
- **Social Mobility:** Equity plays a crucial role in endorsing social mobility by providing equitable educational opportunities. It enables students from disadvantaged backgrounds to come out of the vicious cycle of poverty and improve their prospects.
- **Empowering Marginalized Groups:** Equity empowers marginalized groups by providing them a voice and ensuring that their needs are satisfied in the education system. It helps them to overcome the historical and societal barriers that obstruct their educational progress.
- **Creating a Just Society:** Equity in education is related to the principle of social justice. It aims to create a just society where everyone has an equal opportunity to prosper and contribute substantially to the community.
- **Economic Benefits:** An equitable education system benefits the society economically. Access to quality education and acquisition of requisite skills contribute to a productive and innovative workforce.
- **Promoting Global Competitiveness:** Countries with equitable education systems can successfully compete in the global market. A well-educated and skilled human resource is necessary for attracting investment and driving economic growth.

Equity in school education is significant because of the following factors:

- It gives opportunity to underprivileged and disadvantaged students so that they can succeed.
- It gives each and every student the chance to learn in the way according to their learning style.
- It helps students to become more engaged with others who share their race, gender, or ethnicity in their learning materials and during lessons.
- It increases students' access to resources to enhance their education.
- It strengthens the connection between a student's family and his teachers, so that an enriching educational environment can be fostered at home.
- It guides students to flourish in their educational career, profession, and life.
- It closes the opportunity and achievement gaps between students by placing them on equal footing.
- It influences the community in positive ways.

### Barriers to Educational Equity

Some of the biggest barriers to equity in education are as follows:

- **Socioeconomic Factors:** It is often seen that children coming from low-income families do not have access to quality resources, fight to meet their basic needs like nutrition and healthcare, and have to prioritize working over schooling to support their families. For example, poor children often fail to access early childhood education programmes, educational toys and books at home, or tutoring services to facilitate their learning.
- **Geographical Disparities:** Schools in rural or economically depressed areas often remain underfunded, lack good infrastructure and teaching staffs, and offer fewer advanced courses and cocurricular activities. Sometimes students have to travel long distances to reach the nearest school, making schooling challenging. Geographical disparities also bring differences between urban and suburban school districts or even among neighbouring communities.



- **Gender Inequality:** In many cultures, societal norms and stereotypical thought processes hinder equal access to education for their girls. From facing no encouragement in fields where girls are usually underrepresented, to dropping out due to child marriage or household responsibilities, gender inequality acts as a major barrier to girls' education. Even in relatively progressive societies, unspoken biases and lack of role models can hamper gender equality in education for girls.
- **Cultural and Linguistic Barriers:** A lack of culturally relevant curriculum and teaching methods lead to disengagement in the teaching learning process. Language barriers hinder understanding and academic achievement of students. Unfair treatment based on race, even if it is unintentional, can make students feel like they are outsiders. This can undermine their confidence and make them feel inferior in their classroom.

### Strategies to Promote Educational Equity

Strategies that can promote educational equity in schools are as follows:

- **Policy Interventions:** Government and education authorities can play a significant role in reducing inequities through policy measures. This can include reorganising school funding to allocate more resources to underprivileged areas, implementing positive action policies for underrepresented groups, and authorising inclusive curriculum and accommodations. For example, introduction of midday meals programme to support students from low-income families.
- **Role of NGOs and Community Organisations:** NGOs working for child education, like CRY India and community-based organisations can play an additional role by supporting the government efforts and work directly with marginalized communities. They can provide supplemental education services, conduct outreach in the society to raise awareness about the importance of education and promote for policy changes. For instance, CRY India's initiatives ensure children access quality education and try to create a conducive learning environment.
- **Cultivating an Inclusive Classroom Culture:** The culture in the classroom should be such that it responds positively to diversity and respects the backgrounds and experiences of all students. This will encourage open discussions about different perspectives and will foster an atmosphere of mutual respect.
- **Innovative Educational Practices:** Restructuring conservative teaching methods and accepting innovative practices can help create a more balanced learning experience. Approaches like project-based learning, culturally responsive pedagogy, and use of technology in the classroom can make education more engaging, accessible and fruitful. An excellent example is using multimedia resources and hands-on activities to cater to the needs of students having different learning styles.
- **Teacher Training and Development:** Equipping teachers with appropriate teaching skills and right attitude is highly needed for bringing equity in the classroom. Professional development and capacity building programmes can concentrate on issues like implicit bias, cultural competency, differentiated instruction, and inclusive learning environment. Schools can arrange workshops on gender-neutral language and avoid stereotypical portrayals in teaching learning materials.
- **Addressing Systemic Issues:** By becoming sensitive to issues like gender, poverty, and ethnicity, teachers can find ways to guide students to tackle the effects of these issues on their educational journey. Addressing these deep-rooted issues can help teachers remove obstacles to student learning and reduce biases and disparities present in the education system.
- **Understanding the Role Administration and Leadership:** Sometimes, administrators and school leaders may unknowingly help to disseminate inequity in the education system. In these cases, teachers should



alert leadership and then coordinate with them to introduce positive change. Teachers who know when and how to collaborate with administrators can greatly bring in equity in their classrooms, schools, and communities.

- **Removing Barriers in the School Environment:** Learning and development gaps are often noticed in the early stage of a student's education. The more proficient teachers are at identifying these gaps, the more likely it is for a student to overcome. To eliminate educational barriers, teachers can educate parents on support systems and resources available to their children. These resources might include parent-teacher conferences, one-to-one tutors, remedial and special classes, and after-school programmes. If there is an issue of financial problem, teachers can help parents find inexpensive resources that can assist their children.
- **Knowing the Students:** Teachers must put effort to know their students individually. They must understand students' strengths, challenges, and interests. This knowledge will help them to modify their teaching approach to satisfy the diverse needs of the students.
- **Differentiating Instruction:** Using diversified teaching methods and materials can accommodate students possessing different learning styles and abilities. Differentiating instruction can ensure that every student engage himself with the content at his own pace and level.
- **Providing Targeted Support:** Students who need extra support must be identified and targeted interventions must be carried out to help them succeed. This can include individual tutoring, additional resources, providing practice worksheets or specialized programmes.
- **Using Culturally Relevant Teaching:** Incorporating culturally relevant teaching materials and examples can reflect the diverse backgrounds of the students in the classroom. This approach can help students see themselves in the curriculum and feel more associated with the content.
- **Providing Accessible Learning Materials:** School authorities must ensure that all learning materials, including textbooks and online resources are accessible to all students enrolled in their schools.
- **Addressing Equity Concerns:** If discrepancies in student outcomes are noticed, proactive steps must immediately be taken to address them. Teachers must collaborate with students, parents, and colleagues to find solutions and support backward students.
- **Engaging Families:** Families must be involved in the learning process by communicating openly with them, inviting them to participate in school activities, and asking for their input on their child's education.
- **Embracing and Enabling Technology:** Technology plays a key role in a student's education. But unfortunately, some students may not access internet to support their studies at home. For these students the school authority and the teachers can create a valuable avenue of support in the school itself by providing access to reliable technology in the classroom.
- **Evaluating Student Performance Regularly:** Monitoring student performance is an important part of teaching, as it can make teaching strategies effective. Teachers who are dedicated to educational equity must regularly evaluate how students are performing and then determine what steps are needed to improve their performance.

## Conclusion

- Promoting equity in the classroom requires wholehearted commitment of all the stakeholders to comprehend and meet the diverse needs of every student. By implementing beneficial strategies, educators can create an inclusive learning environment that supports success of all students. By promoting educational equity academic performance of students would improve, achievement gaps would diminish, social and emotional well-being would enhance, diversity and inclusion would be



promoted, marginalized communities would be empowered, economic growth will be boosted, poverty and inequality would reduce, and as a result there would be long-term social impact and strengthened democracy. Equity in education is a vision of NEP 2020 where all individuals would be afforded equal opportunities to achieve their fullest potential and prosper academically and personally. Ultimately, equity in education is a transformative force that would not only shape the future of individual learners but would also have a profound impact on the society as a whole. Thus, by implementing the principles of equity, a significant step would be taken towards building a fair, inclusive, and thriving global community.

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## Transforming Education for a Better Future: SDG 4 in the Context of Agenda 2030

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### Abstract

Quality education is fundamental to a child's development and future opportunities. Quality education helps all children to develop completely as a whole such as cognitive growth, social relationship building, emotional resilience building, mental development, and physical development without any basis of caste, race, gender, color, and socio-economic perspective. Education always develops empowerment, essential to live a successful life. It helps the individual to cope peacefully with any hard situations or circumstances. Quality education always helps to break the poverty line and inequality in society. To enhance the quality of education, a competent teacher's role is very important. Quality does not denote quantity; it only signifies how the students learn effectively and can achieve proper learning outcomes. The method of the work is a qualitative and descriptive study. The researcher collected data from secondary sources like various journals, articles, and websites. In this work the main focus is on SDG goal 4 (Quality Education), the targets of SDG goal 4, the positions of SDG goal 4 on an overall world basis, positions of India on SDG goal 4, some government initiatives for achieving quality education, some issues for achieving quality education in India, and how we can achieve SDG Goal 4.

**Keywords:** *Quality Education, empowerment, cognitive development, SDG goal 4, learning outcome.*

### Introduction

Before the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), there were MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) and MDG came in the year 2000 in September. The period of MDGs was from 2000 to 2015. In MDGs, there are eight goals. In 2015, the MDG goal was agreed to be achieved. After MDG, the United Nations (UN) took on SDG which is popularly known as Agenda 2030 (UNDP, 2024) [1]. There are a total of 17 SDGs and each goal



is targeted to be achieved by the year 2030. The total number of targets under the SDGs is 169. 193 members of UN are involved to achieve all 17 goals within the year of 2030. For achieving SDGs, NITI Aayog play a very significant role. Therefore, SDG is a very extensive project than MDG (Mahajan, 58).

After knowing each and every goal of SDG; we can understand that, for achieving all SDG goals by 2030, Education is one of the most significant or vital and is needed for achieving most of the goals. Most of the goals are linked with the education (Agbedahin 2019, 4-5). Hence, this paper is mainly focused on SDG Goal 4, which is Quality Education – Ensure education accessible to everyone, fairness in education by providing support where needed, offering effective, relevant education and promote continuous education throughout life, adapting to changing needs and challenges for all. SDG Goal 4 aims that by 2030 all children must be able to access free and compulsory education from primary education to top level education irrespective of gender, caste, religion and from marginalized group of people or community (Saini et.al 2022, 2033). SDG Goal 4 has mainly 10 targets, which give more importance to children, youth and adults and give emphasis on continuous education (Boeren, 2019). SDG goal 4 also says that both learners, girls & boys must have access to vocational education and skill development for employment and jobs which is essential for fostering economic independence and improving individual's quality of life. As this goal promotes lifelong learning, it signifies adult literacy and mathematical ability. Even, the last Education Policy (NEP 2020), focuses on providing ample knowledge to all students through various skills and vocational skills. Our nation always aims to provide education for all students (Pandey, 2018; 6).

Our country, always tries to give basic education for both girl and boys children (Saxena, 2020; 89-90). SDG Goal 4 focuses on the marginalized group of people or community (Ydo, 2022).

Hence, the government of India aimed to reach quality education. Our government set up enormous schemes to bring quality education. Government launched enormous projects named as – SSA, RMSA, Right to Education, SWAYAM projects, National Literacy Mission and many scholarships for all disadvantaged students (Singh, 2022; 235). The five -year plan also focuses on to enhance learning prospects; and all sections of students must get same access for learning (Pandey, 2018; 6). Quality education aims to prepare all student in such a way; so that they can perform actively within the society and also can perform easily in future for getting jobs (Adipat and Chotikapanich, 2021; 175).

According to Rammohan (2018), stated that in northern India, women are lagging behind men. There is a lot of gender inequality. Women's schooling is very much poor than the men's schooling.

Muff et al. (2017), stated in their study that there are SDG 17 goals, and goal 4 deals with quality education. All students must access education without any kind of discrimination and all the students from disadvantaged groups such as scheduled caste, scheduled tribe, and disabled children must get the opportunities to get quality education. In SDG Goal 4, there are 3 objectives, which always help to achieve the 7 targets of SDG Goal 4.

Pandey (2018), stated that India is trying to make progress in Education for All Programs. The fundamental right is also implemented, so all students get free and compulsory education from 6 to 12 years. The government must look after various problems related to quality education.



According to Beena (2019), India has promised that by the year 2030, all children will be able to access equitable, quality, and inclusive education. That's why the government of India launched schemes of SSA, RTE, and RMSA for free and compulsory education to all students from primary to secondary education and also to enhance the retention, enrolment, and better infrastructure of students in schools.

### Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows: -

- To understand about the SDG 4 target.
- To identify the relation between the other Goals of SDG.
- To study the overall progress of SDG 4 all over India.
- To see the India's progress of SDG 4.
- To state various government schemes for achieving quality education in India.
- To understand some issues mainly in India for achieving quality education.

### Methodology

This paper overviews the 'SDG 4(Quality Education): In the context of Agenda 2030'. This research work is qualitative and follows a descriptive method. The way of collection of information is secondary data and the facts were collected from sources such as - journals, articles, and websites.

### Structure of the paper

The first sub-point discusses about SDG Goal 4 in introductory part. The second sub-point discusses about SDG Goal 4 Targets. The third sub-point discusses about the other SDGs Goal with SDG Goal 4. The fourth sub-point discusses about the overall Status of SDG Goal 4. The fifth sub-point discusses the status of India from the perspective of SDG Goal 4. The sixth sub-point discusses some government initiatives for achieving SDG Goal 4. The seventh sub-point has discussed some issues related to achieving quality education. The eighth sub-point discusses how we can achieve SDG Goal 4 easily. The 9th sub-point discusses based on the paper. The tenth sub-point discusses the conclusion.

- Targets of SDG Goal 4

In Sustainable Development Goal 4 there are 7 targets are discussed below: -

**SDG Target 4.1** - This target says that by the year 2030, all the children both boys and girls get universal access to free primary & secondary education in a good quality manner without any discrimination and can achieve effective learning outcomes. Only, 56% of students were not able to read properly.

**SDG Target 4.2**- This target says that by the year 2030, all children, both boys and girls, should have access to high- quality pre-primary education facilitated by well-trained instructors. This ensures that every child is prepared for and can transition smoothly into primary education. Only, 17% of countries are legally stipulated for one year of free and compulsory education.



**SDG Target 4.3-** This target says that by the year 2030, all men and women can easily access reasonable price and high-quality technological, vocational and higher education. It is vital to decrease barriers to skill development, technological and hands-on learning & training from the beginning of secondary to higher education.

**SDG Target 4.4-** This target says that by the year 2030, the number of adults must increase in the area of technological & vocational skills so they get jobs. The training programs should be increased, so all youths, especially girls and women get the opportunities to gain various information, skills, and competency for getting employment. The youth must be able to easily access vocational training and can achieve high cognitive skills such as critical thinking, logical thinking, teamwork, problem-solving, and communication skills. Many adults are not competent in basic computer skills.

**SDG Target 4.5-** This target says that by the year 2030, all types of discrimination in education must be removed. This means that each girl, boy, man, and woman get an equal opportunity to receive higher education, vocational education in the perspective of caste, race, sexual category, age, pigment, creed, and language. Disadvantage groups, disabled individuals, and vulnerable populations need special attention. Only 66% of countries achieved primary education, 45% achieved lower secondary education, and 25% achieved upper secondary education.

**SDG Target 4.6-** This target says that by the year 2030, all individuals of all ages must have achieved basic reading and mathematical skills after the completion of primary education. The literacy rate is below 60% in low-income countries.

**SDG Target 4.7-** This target says that by the year 2030, all learners should acquire knowledge, skills, and values that support sustainable development through Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and promotion of global citizenship such as peace, non-violence, and human rights. From the year 2009 to 2012, only 7% of teacher education programs covered ESD (Education for Sustainable Development).

(SDG 4: QUALITY EDUCATION, A4ID, Legal Guide 2022, 6-12)

### Means of Implementation:

**SDG Target 4. A-** This target says that by 2030, an effective and safe learning environment is essential for nurturing academic, social, and emotional growth and proper physical infrastructure facilities for all pupil irrespective of any discrimination. Less than 3 quarters of primary schools have adequate infrastructure.

**SDG Target 4. B -** This target says that by the year 2020, there must be increase in the scholarships globally in both underdeveloped nations and first-world countries so that all students can enroll in higher education, vocational, engineering, scientific programs, and information & communication technology. The fellowships are very beneficial to the socio-economically disadvantaged groups. The scholarship is decreased by 4%.

**SDG Target 4. C -** This target says that by the year 2030, there must be increase in the qualified, trained and competent teachers in every educational institution by the international association to enhance the



professional development in both underdeveloped nations and first-world countries. The teachers need to achieve all the targets of SDG. Untrained teachers and less competent teachers cannot give quality education to teachers. Globally, 86% of teachers are trained only at the primary school level.

(SDG 4 Data Week, 2018, 7).

● SDG Goal 4 is closely interconnected with other Goals

**Goal 1 (No Poverty)** - With the help of goal 4, poverty can be removed, when all individuals can access quality education.

**Goal 2 (Zero Hunger)** - With the help of goal 4, all can access quality early childhood development.

**Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-Being)**- With the help of Goal 4, having or getting good health and well-being of sense will develop within all individuals.

**Goal 5 (Gender Equality)** - With the help of goal 4, gender inequality can be removed or decreased on any grounds. All people had the right to do any work, especially disadvantaged groups.

**Goal 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation)**- With the help of goal 4, all individuals develop the concept of safe and clean water and adequate sanitation facilities, essential for both girls and boys in schools, and other public places are crucial.

**Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth)** - With the help of goal 4, any knowledge and skills can be enhanced and employment can be increased.

**Goal 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure)** - From goal 4, industrialization and various innovation and infrastructure facilities can be developed or enhanced.

**Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities)** - With the help of goal 4, the inequalities and the concept of discrimination will be decreased or removed by allowing all people, especially women to do any kind of work and develop women's empowerment.

**Goal 12 (Sustainable Consumption and Production)** - The help of goal 4, gives knowledge and understanding about sustainable consumption and production of resources.

**Goal 13 (Climate Change)**- With the help of goal 4, people can be aware and develop a sense or concept about climate change and hazards, that hamper the world.

(SDG INDIA INDEX, 2018, 2)

● Overall Progress of SDG 4

In the year 2016, due to some reason, the millennium development goals cannot be achieved fully by the year 2015. In the year 2013, 59 million students did not attend primary school. Mostly, 20% of the students dropped out and 40% did not even attend school. The country Africa is facing such a problem. In the year 2013, 71% of teachers in sub-Saharan Africa and 84% in North Africa only fulfilled the national training



standards. In the year 2017, 263 million students were not attending schools. The World's 70% of the countries are Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. In only 60% of developing countries, primary and secondary schools can able to access computers and the internet for teaching, and below 40%, in Saharan countries. In the year 2018 it is seen that in 2016, only 70% achieved the rate in early children and primary education. In 2016, 85% of primary schools received training; however, the percentage was notably lower in regions such as South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. More than 50% were not capable to read and write and do mathematics. 750 million adults were illiterate. In the year 2020, due to covid 19, the learning outcomes of students are hampered. 773 million adults were lagging in basic reading and writing. In the year 2022, globally, only 10% of people have basic digital skills like sending emails to others and only 25% of primary schools are equipped with basic amenities such as drinking water, electricity, sanitation, and some technological facilities. In the year 2023, 84 million students are out of school and 300 million students do not have proper reading and writing skills. The facilities for disabled children are not in a good position and 14% of teachers are not so qualified properly. But in the year 2024, 58% of students can read by the end of primary education and there is a teacher shortage and insufficient training in Sub-Saharan Africa (Bhupinder, 2024; 172-173).

- ***India's Progress of SDG 4***

Elementary education is a crucial foundation for the development of any nation. In India, significant issues persist, particularly in achieving the goal of education for all children. Gender disparities remain a critical challenge, with women's literacy lagging at 65.46% compared to men's 82.14% (2011 data). Despite improvements in enrollment, challenges in learning outcomes and infrastructure persist. In 2010, 4% of children aged 6-10 and 7% of children aged 11-14 were not enrolled in schools. While enrollment rose to 96.7% in 2011, foundational skills remained weak. For instance, Class 5 students struggled to read Class 2 textbooks, highlighting the poor academic performance identified by ASER 2011. Dropout rates also declined from 53.7% in 2010 to 48.2% in 2011, but regional disparities are stark. States like Himachal Pradesh show promise, with lower dropout rates and favorable student-teacher ratios. Conversely, regions such as Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and West Bengal face severe challenges. In Madhya Pradesh, literacy rates dropped from 67% in 2007 to 54.5% in 2011. Uttar Pradesh saw only 74.04% literacy in those aged above seven in 2011. Infrastructure inadequacies exacerbate these issues. Although 85% of educational institutes having facilities of drinking water, merely one-fourth have electricity, and 5.7% offer computer facilities. A striking concern is the lack of discrete latrines for young girl students in many elementary schools, with Uttar Pradesh reporting 81.7% of such schools lacking this basic facility. India's literacy growth from 2001 to 2011 was 9.2%, but this progress has slowed. Additionally, 26% of the population remains illiterate, and just 15% of students continue to high school. These gaps emphasize the need for urgent reforms to strengthen educational outcomes and address inequities in access, quality, and infrastructure. Improving teacher training, bridging gender disparities, and enhancing school amenities are essential for achieving equitable and inclusive education in India (Singh, 2013; 237-238).

- ***Government Initiatives for achieving Quality Education***

India faces significant challenges in its elementary and secondary education system, particularly in government schools. Poor infrastructure, lack of innovative teaching methods, and inadequate facilities have resulted in subpar quality education. Rural schools suffer more acutely due to limited resources and teaching



innovations. Consequently, the Government of India has implemented several schemes and policies focused on enhancing access to quality education and achieving the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 targets, and fostering equitable education.

### *Key Government Initiatives:*

**Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE)**- Initiated in 2001, UEE focuses on providing free and compulsory education for youngsters between the ages of 6 and 14 years. The scheme ensures that schools are accessible within walking distance, and it mandates five years of primary and three years of upper-primary education. UEE is directly linked to SDG Goal 4, Target 4.1, which promotes free, equitable, & excellence in primary and secondary education.

**Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)** - Launched in 2001, SSA aims to achieve the objectives of UEE. It provides free and compulsory education for children in the 6–14 age group. This flagship program spearheaded by the former PM, Sri Atal Bihari Vajpayee is vital to achieving SDG Target 4.1.

**The Right to Education (RTE) Act of 2009**, passed by Parliament, ensures free and compulsory education for children between the ages of 6 and 14. It mandates a 25% reservation for underprivileged groups, including Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and children with disabilities addressing equity concerns under SDG Target 4.1.

**Ishan Vikas and Ishan Uday Schemes** - Designed for students from the Northeast, Ishan Vikas connects students with technical institutions like IITs and NITs (Target 4.1, 4.3). Meanwhile, IshanUday offers scholarships for families more than ₹4.5 lakh annually, fostering equitable educational opportunities under Targets 4.a, 4.b, and 4.5.

**Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA)** - Launched in 2009, RMSA seeks to enhance secondary education quality and improve enrollment rates from 52% in 2009 to 75% by 2014. This scheme aims to ensure that secondary schools are accessible within a reasonable distance from every student's home and aligns with SDG 4 Target 4.1.

**Rashtriya Avishkar Abhiyan (RAA)** - Launched in 2015, RAA encourages children aged 6 to 18 to explore science, mathematics, and technology. Schools encourage students' participation in different scholastic competitions to foster innovation, aligning with SDG 4.

**Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan** - A comprehensive education scheme introduced in 2018, Samagra Shiksha aims to provide equitable, inclusive, and quality education from pre-primary to Class 12. It offers textbooks to students, remedial teaching to 1.3 crore children, and self-defense training for girls, addressing several SDG 4 Targets.

**SAKSHAM** - This scheme is given by AICTE. The primary objective of this scheme is to provide scholarships to students with disabilities, enabling them to pursue technical education. This scheme is related to SDG Target 4.6, 4. a, 4.b.



**Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Abhiyan** - This campaign, targeting 100 districts, promotes Girls' education and aims to address gender disparities in education. It contributes to multiple SDG 4 Targets, including 4.2, 4.5, and 4.7.

**Mid-Day Meal Scheme** - This program, initiated in 1995, combats malnutrition and encourages school enrollment among disadvantaged children. It is a momentous phase towards increasing student retention.

**SWAYAM Programme** - Through online learning facilitated by reputable university professors, SWAYAM provides free courses and affordable certifications. This initiative aligns with SDG Targets 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4.

**Udaan Initiative** - Run by CBSE, Udaan supports underprivileged girls in learning technical subjects like math and science. It advances SDG Targets 4.a, 4.b, and 4.6.

#### *Digital and Technology-Based Education Initiatives:*

**National E-Library** - The E-Library provides access to quality academic materials for students, teachers, and researchers through digital devices.

**e-Pathshala** - This digital platform offers textbooks, videos, and other educational resources to students and teachers.

#### *Schemes for Girl Education:*

**Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV)** - It established in 2004, offers residential school facilities specifically for girls in the disadvantaged rural areas, focusing on their educational development.

**Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana** - By providing bicycles to girls enrolled in Class 9 and 10, this scheme reduces dropout rates and ensures easy access to schools (Sengupta et. al, 2022; 2043-2045).

- **Issues related to achieving quality education**

India faces numerous challenges in its pursuit of quality education despite implementing various government initiatives. The struggle is particularly pronounced in village areas, where most of the pupils lack access to essential resources and equitable learning opportunities. The following are some of the main challenges that impede the attainment of quality education in India:

#### *Lack of Funding*

A major challenge faced in the education sector is the inadequate allocation of funds to schools, especially those in rural regions. Limited financial resources result in inadequate infrastructure, including outdated textbooks, poor drinking water systems, lack of electricity, insufficient classroom facilities, and non-existent libraries or computer labs. Schools also struggle to provide separate and functional toilets, a basic necessity that impacts the learning environment.

#### *Infrastructure Deficiencies*

Schools in rural areas face severe infrastructural shortcomings. Many students attend classes in unsafe, overcrowded classrooms without proper ventilation or learning materials. Essential amenities eg. clean drinkable water, electricity, and functional sanitation systems are either absent or inadequate. This neglect



creates an uninviting and unhealthy environment, making it challenging for children to focus on their studies.

### *Inequality and Accessibility*

Socio-economic factors create significant barriers to quality education. Children from disadvantaged groups, marginalized communities, and low-income families face difficulties accessing proper schooling. Gender disparities persist in village, where female child are often denied education due to far reaches, meager conveyance amenities, or cultural prejudices. Many parents undervalue the importance of educating girls, instead prioritizing household chores over schooling. Disabled pupils face extra obstacles due to insufficient accessibility in schools and limited supportive facilities.

### *Teacher Training and Student-Teacher Ratio*

Proper teacher training is crucial for quality education. However, many teachers, especially in rural areas, lack the necessary qualifications, skills, and training to effectively engage students. Modern teaching methods that integrate technology and promote active participation are rarely used. Compounding this issue is an imbalanced student-teacher ratio, with many schools operating far below the recommended 30:1 ratio, leading to overcrowded classrooms and reduced individual attention for students.

### *Outdated Curriculum*

The curriculum in most government schools is outdated and heavily focused on rote memorization rather than critical thinking and problem-solving. This traditional approach fails to prepare students for the demands of modern society, depriving them of essential practical and analytical skills. A student-centered, interdisciplinary curriculum that aligns with contemporary societal needs is imperative for fostering holistic development.

### *Technological Limitations*

Technological integration in education can enhance learning outcomes significantly. However, most rural schools lack access to basic technological tools such as computers and internet services due to funding shortages. The high cost of setting up and maintaining technological infrastructure further exacerbates the problem, leaving students in rural areas deprived of these modern learning resources.

### *Assessment and Evaluation Gaps*

The traditional evaluation system used in most schools emphasizes rote memorization over practical knowledge and skills development. This assessment approach fails to evaluate the holistic growth of students and does not prepare them for real-world challenges. There is a pressing need to shift toward formative and competency-based evaluation methods that focus on critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills.

### *Cultural and Societal Barriers*

Cultural norms and societal attitudes significantly hinder education, particularly for girls. In remote areas, rigid societal beliefs often prevent girls from attending school, with families prioritizing domestic responsibilities over education. These attitudes are rooted in misconceptions about the value of educating



girls and perpetuate a cycle of inequality and limited opportunities for future generations (EuroSchoolblogs, 2024).

- **How can SDG Goal 4 be achieved?**

First of all, all schools and homes need to create a favorable environment. All (boys and girls) children should get equal opportunities for education in educational institutions from both villages & town or city areas. The second is, that all scholastic institutes should modify the curriculum according to the needs of society and students. The curriculum must be inclusive, equitable, and better quality. The *third* thing is that all educators should make use of appropriate lessons and methods, so all students will be able to know them easily and all teachers must be competent for using proper teaching methods. The *fourth* thing is that there should be effective communication between the students and teachers. As we know proper communication can enhance the teaching-learning process. The teacher should be kind to clear the doubt of a student and all students can easily clear or discuss various problems. The *fifth* point is being in good health. Having good health is very important for having an education. Good health always enhances or motivates the process of learning of the pupil and can be able to develop and think rationally and abstractly (Ossai, 2022). The gross enrolment ratio of girls in the overall category is 116.7 and the ratio of boys is 115.4 (Educational Statistics, MHRD, 2013, P-9).

### Discussion

From the above study, it can be understood that, in the state of West Bengal the condition of rate of enrollment in schools is not in a good condition. It is necessary to increase the rate of enrollment in schools to achieve the target of 100. The states of Assam, Odisha, and Arunachal Pradesh are also in poor condition. The states of Himachal Pradesh and Pondicherry are trying to reduce the dropout rates of schools. In the state of Bihar, the higher education rates, literacy rates, teacher-student ratio, and gender disparity index need to be increased. The teacher training institutes need to be increased in the state of Assam. In India, the enrolment of disabled students needs to increase and the schools must provide essential assistance or support to all students for empowerment. In the schools, the basic infrastructure and sanitation facilities must be improved.

### Conclusion

At last, we can say that to achieve SDG Goal 4 proper initiatives and various policies in education need to come into force for a quality education system. Already, the government has introduced several initiatives to ensure the provision of educational excellence, focusing on accessibility, inclusivity, and overall development then again have to take a lot of serious actions or steps for the states where the enrolment rates of schools are very low. To achieve SDG Goal 4, it is very necessary to create a very good environment and culture in schools, in which quality education will be very much effective and the instruction will also enhance for all students, and they can foster sustainable knowledge and understanding, which is essential for living in the future in a good way and being responsible human beings.



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## Sustainable Democracy in the 21st Century

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### Abstract

This paper interprets the concept of sustainable democracy in 21<sup>st</sup> century along with interpreting related definition, challenges and strategies to address the challenges. Likewise, this research helps to understand that sustainable democracy is a governance model that helps to ensure societal wellbeing, promotes inclusivity and safeguards democratic values. It needs participation of citizens, accountability and equitable representation besides, addressing social, economic and environmental issues. Additionally, this paper traced certain challenges related to sustainable democracy including democratic backslashing, political polarization, erosion of democratic institutions, spread of misleading data through technology, climate change and so on. Also, populism and authoritarianism are identified as major threats for democracy that reduce trust on public process and institutions. The research has gathered data using secondary data collection method and interpreted the data using thematic analysis.

Similarly, the research has helped to understand that role of civil societies, democratic institutions and citizens are crucial to address such challenges. Nations like Poland, Hungary and others has issues related to their democracy. However, they have included strategies to address these challenges. Strategies like civic education, rule of law, monitoring medias and addressing social inequalities are done. Global bodies like IDEA, OSCE, EU and others plays important role in adopting sustainable democracy. The research findings also reflect the importance of decentralization, well-structured election process and legislative strength to progress sustainable democracy. Also, empowering civil societies and ensuring participation of informed citizens, democratic values can be preserved. Also, inclusive governance and global collaboration is needed to address interconnected challenges like geopolitical tension and to embrace sustainable democracy. Thus, effort from government and citizens will help to ensure justice and sustainable democracy in 21<sup>st</sup> century.



*Keywords: inclusivity; accountability, populism, decentralization, collaboration*

## Introduction to Sustainable Democracy

Sustainable democracy can be defined as the practice of developing and maintaining a governance system that supports democratic values besides adapting to modern day challenges such as disinformation, political polarization, economic inequality, climate change and others, that threatens the stability of democratic system. The term goes beyond the traditional concept of democracy and focuses on inclusivity, resilience and an equitable political system that address current challenges and protects interest and rights of future generations. Likewise, in the 21st century, sustainable democracy needs innovative policies, strong institutions, informed and active citizens which can together address local as well as global challenges. This approach makes sure that democracy is not only functional in the present but also adaptable to changing scenarios (Pickering et al., 2022). Moreover, achieving sustainable democracy needs to balance state power with different societal interests to foster democratic institutions. Such balance nurtures accountability, inclusivity, supports institutions as well as empowers citizens to operate smoothly. Also, the role of political parties, civil societies and governance structure is important to maintain social cohesion.

To support sustainable democracy, it is important to focus on active development of citizens as well as on institution building. Initiatives are needed to reform political systems as well as to democratize the governance process. It needs a wider group of stakeholders including civil society organizations, local government, social movements, electoral institutions, political parties and security forces. Moreover, to advance in social democracy it is important for political forces to reform priorities, strengthen leadership skills within young people and to develop a platform for global dialogue on reforms as well as governance (Pickering et al., 2022). It will help to promote democratic control on the security sector as well as to ensure accountability and engulf trust within state institutions. It is often assumed that democracies possess the capacity to foster basic human freedoms, i.e., certain minimum freedoms relating to those of association, speech, expression and opposition are essential for elections to be meaningful. The checks and balances inherent in a democracy prevent excessive abuse of power and arbitrary oppression while guaranteeing rights and entitlements to citizens and correcting policy errors (Banik, 2022).

Likewise, addressing complex relations between political, social and economic factors, sustainable democracy gives a framework of long-term stability, justice and equity. It highlights the need for integrated effort in different sectors to maintain democratic values, empower citizens and reform governance systems. Such initiatives will help to bring in sustainable democracy and to make inclusive and resilient societies that can meet current as well as future challenges.

## Research background

Sustainable democracy focuses on creating a governance system that maintains democratic principles besides adapting to evolving global issues. However, the rise of nationalism, illiberalism and populism has strained democratic values in the 21st century. It has resulted in democratic laps within both emerging and established democracies. Moreover, issues like declining trust in political parties, politicization of institutions, misuse of technologies and others have increased such challenges. However, irrespective of such challenges, sustainable democracy focuses on developing resilient institutions, making citizens active and to



implement reforms which can protect individual rights. Also, initiatives like “Sustainable Democracy Roundtable” reflect the need for an integrative approach and collaboration of policy makers, scholars and civic leaders to propose unique solutions and to address such issues (Shorenstein, 2024). Likewise, this research will help to understand different approaches related to sustainable democracy in the 21st century.

### Research Objectives

*This research has the following objectives-*

- To understand the concept of sustainable democracy in the 21st century.
- To interpret the challenges that current democracy is facing.
- To identify the strategies to address the challenges and to embrace sustainable democracy.

### Research Questions

- What is the meaning of sustainable democracy in the 21st century?
- What are the challenges to contemporary democracy?
- Which strategies will help to address the challenges?

### Literature Review

This section will use different secondary sources to collect and review literature related to sustainable democracy in the 21st century.

Gareth Price (2024) has propounded that India is one of the world’s most diverse and populated nations, with a revolutionary past and a promising future of endless development, growth, and prosperity. Perhaps the greatest challenge democracy faces in India is the inability to achieve consistent economic growth and eradicate extreme poverty. Additionally, there rose claims of deteriorating civil liberties and institutional autonomy.

Center for South Asia and Global Studies (2023) has stated in their research that the enactment of the religious-centric Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 (CAA), reading down of Article 370 and loss of statehood for Kashmir, frequent invocation of sedition law against political dissenters, and assault on India’s free press are some examples which explain the backsliding of Indian democracy.

Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Press (2022) in their paper study the world as it faces a democratic recession. They propound that anti-democratic leaders’ motivations and methods reveal valuable insights about different types of backsliding and how international actors should respond. They blame the powerful authoritarian states like Russia and China for anti-democratic influences across the globe.

Phillipa Williams (2021) has talked about the impact of social media, especially WhatsApp on the quality of democracy in India. These platforms are used by various political parties and their supporters to spread their propaganda. In doing so these platforms become inundated with fake news and biased information affecting everyday “political talk” in India. This study helps in understanding the implications for lived democracy. Further it talks about how public digital platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have



transformed the quality of democratic practices bringing about new forms of expression and encouraging the emergence of computer-aided elections. The paper argues how the digital private sphere helps building civic connections by reconciling the personal and political. It demonstrates the necessity of integrating digital spaces and kinship into geographies of democracy and highlights the situated implications of digital private spaces in contemporary political life.

Thulasi Raj (2021) has stated that transparency and access to information improve public trust and accountability. On the evening of 24 March 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a 21-day national lockdown which was set to begin within four hours. The lockdown was extremely harsh leading to a complete ban on transport including international and domestic travel, closure of schools, non-essential shops and prohibition on assembly and events. This abrupt declaration without any prior notice left a country of around 1.366 billion people in utter confusion and disarray. Shutdown led to a sudden halt in freedom of movement and access to resources. It caused a disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups such as students, women, the disabled, the poor and the homeless.

“Since the end of the Cold War, most democratic breakdowns have been caused not by generals and soldiers but by elected governments themselves” – this is a central claim of *How Democracies Die*, co-authored by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. The recent military coup in Myanmar, along with the 2014 coup in Thailand and the 1999 coup in Pakistan, represents an anomaly in modern times, as coups were more common in the 1960s and 1970s. Today, however, the more widespread phenomenon is what scholars refer to as “democratic backsliding,” which describes the gradual decline of democracy, often driven by elected officials through legal means (Varshney, 2021).

Anand Panyarachan (2008) has stated that democracy starts with the wisdom of the voting public however that wisdom is acquired. Democracy requires its citizens to be well-informed of various issues pertaining to their society. Many developing countries struggle to streamline resources to make education more relevant to the tasks of daily lives to divert the attention from memorisation to creativity and independent thinking. The paper further enlists the factors that are essential for the sustainability of democracy namely, elections, political tolerance, the rule of law, freedom of expression, accountability and transparency, decentralization and civil society.

Phillip C. Schmitter and Imco Brouwer (1999) have discussed the protection and promotion of democracy by established democracies. They have stated since there is no apolitical way to democratise there can be no apolitical strategy to promote and protect democracy. In order to evaluate the impact of the promotion and protection of democracy requires studies at three levels namely, micro, meso and macro.

Ashutosh Varshney (1998) in his paper has stated that India has baffled theorists of democracy. Democratic theory states that poverty, widespread illiteracy and a deeply hierarchical social structure are unfavourable conditions for the functioning of democracy. Despite the presence of these conditions in Indian society India has maintained its democratic institutions ever since it gained independence in 1947 except for 18 months in 1975-77. The central government has witnessed peaceful transfer of power over those five decades. The press has remained vigorous, free and unafraid to challenge the government. The judiciary maintains institutional autonomy. Election turnout keeps increasing with each passing general election. The author states that the dangers for Indian democracy still persists because of many reasons particularly the lack of trust Indian people have on the political leaders.



### Concept of sustainable democracy

Dimitrova, (2020), mentioned that sustainable democracy focuses on the relationship between citizens, elites and the state. The article mentions that democratic relapsing occurs when elites capture the state due to their personal gain. They capture through their network of political parties. It results in creating a disconnection between the broader society and the government. Under such a scenario, citizens protest to achieve an inclusive democracy. Thus, sustainable democracy needs wider societal mobilization to ensure that governance remains accountable for every citizen. Likewise, the goal of sustainable democracy is to maintain the laws and to address underlying challenges.

Sustainable democracy can be defined as a governance model that ensures long-term preservation of democratic principles, societal well-being as well as inclusivity. It focuses on active participation of citizens, strong democratic institutions and equitable representation that helps to address underlying challenges besides, protecting rights of future generations. Moreover, sustainable democracy needs to balance between state power, eliminating elite dominance as well as to promote accountability via transparent process. Sustainable democracy supports marginalized groups, youth and includes diverse voices. Similarly, the concept of sustainable democracy also identifies the importance of resilience against risks like authoritarianism, populism as well as political polarization (Ouguergouz, 2021). It highlights the importance of human rights, rule of law and social justice to achieve stable governance. Likewise, civil society, government and citizens integrate to adopt evolving economic, social and environmental challenges. Likewise, by nurturing collective responsibility as well as empowering communities, sustainable democracy helps to make progress and prosperity.

### Challenges related to sustainable democracy

International trend of democratic backlash is one of the major threats for sustainable democracy. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance or IDEA has mentioned that the “global democracy index” reflected consistent decline since 2008. Major reasons for such decline are authoritarian regimes and populist leaders. Nations such as Poland and Hungary have been criticized for corroding democratic norms such as suppressing media freedom, discouraging independence of the judiciary system and so on (Kirmani, 2021). On the other hand, nations like the United States have been criticized for including issues like voter suppression, attacks on press and judiciary, condenses election results and others (Kirmani, 2021). Such incidents reflect that strongly democratic nations can also struggle with democratic erosion. This scenario highlights the need to ensure that nations remain transparent and responsive.

Additionally, Khalil et al., (2021), has discussed that democratic institutions like media, judiciary and electoral bodies are crucial to keep any democracy functional. However, in some nations, democratic institutions are under pressure. For example, in countries like India, the judiciary system struggles with intense politicization. Major judicial decisions are influenced by political power and not by legal merit. Such a scenario has declined public trust in the legal system (which is the core of democracy). Moreover, political parties which were traditionally known to work for societal interest have become less functional. Rather, in nations like India, Pakistan and others, politicians are known to use their personal power for their own benefit. They are failing to address diverse needs of the electorate.



Moreover, the rapid rise of new technologies and social media has generated both opportunities and challenges for democracies. Technologies are used by nations to improve democratic engagement and participation. However, Wilson et al., (2020), has discussed that technologies are also being used to spread misinformation that intensifies polarization as well as manipulate public opinion. For example, currently, politicians are using social media to target voters and to tailor their political advertisements. It often results in spreading false or misleading information. It has resulted in creating political division and making it difficult for people to have a shared understanding of political issues. Furthermore, Artificial Intelligence or (AI) in data manipulation and surveillance raise concern regarding freedom of expression, privacy and integrity of democratic systems.

Also, Queiroz-Stein et al., (2023), has discussed that climate change as well as environmental degradation also challenges sustainable democracy as these issues need urgent as well as collaborative global action. However, climate change reflects limitations of democratic system in addressing long-term global issues. For example, in many cases global leaders (under political pressure of powerful industries) prioritize short-term economic gains more than environmental sustainability. Nations like Brazil believe in climate denialism that restricts preventing climate change. These approaches reduce public trust on democratic processes.

Additionally, Kluknavska et al., (2024), has discussed that political polarization has aroused due to populism. It is another challenge for sustainable democracy. Populist movements gave rise to political debate in various nations. Populism gives voice to marginalized groups on the other hand, it weakens democratic values by spreading fear, attacking vulnerable groups as well as creating "us v/s them" attitude. In nations like Hungary, populist leaders have promoted false information, hampered trust in elections and challenged democratic institutions. As political divisions intensify, it becomes harder for democracies to address challenges. It further pressurizes democracies.

To summarize the challenges, it shall be discussed that sustainable democracy struggles with different challenges including democratic backsliding, negative impact on democratic institutions, on technology, political polarization as well as climate change. Thus, addressing such challenges needs integrated efforts from civil societies, government and citizens to reestablish democratic values as well as to implement a transparent system.

### Strategies to address the challenges

Different nations and international bodies have embraced different strategies to safeguard their sustainable demographics. For instance, some nations are concerned to reinforce their rule of law and democratic institutions. The European Union (EU) has taken strict steps to make sure that their member states embrace the needed democratic standards. In response to democratic backlash in Poland and Hungary, EU has taken different actions. The EU has suspended funds for Poland and Hungary as well as imposed legal processing against these nations for hampering press freedom as well as disturbing judicial independence. Additionally, EU has used their power of conditionality to associate allocation of recovery funds from Covid19 pandemic with democratic principles specially, independent judiciary and anti-corruption measures. Also, the European Commission suspended €6.3 billion in three Cohesion Policy programs and €21 billion overall, including funding related to unmet "super milestones" and breaches of rule-of-law principles in Hungary (European Commission, 2024). Such action was a part of EU's wider



strategy to maintain their democratic norms. It ensures that their member states comply with democratic values.

Additionally, within the age of social media, addressing the spread of misinformation has become a major concern for democratic countries. Therefore, nations like the United States and United Kingdom have included strategies to monitor their online platforms and to prevent spreading of misleading information. During the 2020 election in the U.S. efforts were made to spread false information through social media. Therefore, Big organizations like Twitter and Facebook controlled misleading political advertisements specially related to electric integrity. Similarly, Haves, (2023), reported that, UK government proposed an “online safety bill” in 2021 that had the aim to hold tech organizations responsible for spreading harmful contents through their channels. The bill prohibited harmful contents including online abuse, false information and others. Furthermore, the European Commission, (2024), has highlighted that the EU has introduced DSA or the Digital Service Act and DMA or Digital Marketing Act to monitor online platforms so that spreading of harmful contents can be controlled. It made sure that tech giants are accountable for the data they handle and they need to be careful in preventing spread of false data.

Moreover, to make the citizens more active and informed, many nations have invested in “civic education programs”. It has encouraged public participation within democratic process. For example, Mishra, (2024), reported that Finland includes one of the strongest civic education systems across the world. They ensure that students or learners are well-informed about democracy and take part in societal movements. Also, the UN Democracy Fund launched the “Global Democratic Governance and Innovation initiative” in 2020 to promote civic education. These initiatives motivated young members as well as marginalized groups to understand their roles in demographic processes and to maintain sustainable democracy.

Furthermore, the International Monetary Fund, (2020), reported that addressing social inequalities is important for sustainable democracy as broader inequality fuels political polarization and populism. Different nations have taken necessary steps to overcome inequalities by including social welfare programs as well as enhancing education. For example, during the Covid19 pandemic, nations like Germany, New Zealand, South Korea and others have included strong social safety nets and gave economic relief to susceptible populations. These approaches not only aimed to address the negative economic impact of the pandemic but also aimed to promote social cohesion as well as to reduce political discontent. For example, under the Biden Administration’s American Rescue Plan in the United States includes a direct economic check on citizens with the aim to reduce poverty as well as social unrest (The White House, 2021). This strategy aims to protect citizen’s trust on democratic institutions.

Herbert, (2021), discussed that at international level, some bodies like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and or International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) plays an important role in addressing challenges related to sustainable democracy. They put efforts in supporting democratic reforms, monitoring elections and encouraging global corporations to address global challenges like economic inequality and climate change. For example, OSCE actively takes part in monitoring elections of Eastern Europe as well as Central Asia. The body helps to improve transparency during elections in nations like Georgia, Ukraine and others where democratic challenges are noticeable.



Thus, to summarize it shall be discussed that different nations and agencies are putting effort to address the challenges.

## Methodology

This section will help to understand the method through which this research has been constructed.

This research is based on *interpretivism research philosophy*. This philosophy believes that reality is socially constructed and is subjective. This philosophy believes that knowledge is subjective and it evolves through contextual understanding and interpretations (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Therefore, this philosophy has helped to interpret the context of sustainable democracy in the 21st century. Likewise, this philosophy has been selected for this research.

Moreover, there are primarily two types of research approaches including deductive and inductive approaches. This research includes an Inductive *approach*. It helps to observe the gathered data and to understand underlying patterns. It ultimately helps to generate a general theory using the research objectives that can be addressed (Haque, 2022). Likewise, this approach has helped to understand certain patterns from the collected literature like Democratic challenges, sustainable democracy and others. Accordingly, it has generated a theory that answers the research question. On the other hand, the Deductive approach includes developing hypothesis and using collected data, the hypothesis is tested to answer the research questions. However, this research does not include any hypothesis thus the deductive method is not suitable.

Moreover, there are different types of research strategy but this research is based on *grounded theory strategy*. This strategy helps to develop a new theory where the theory is grounded in data. This theory helps to answer the research questions. Also, it is suitable with inductive and qualitative methods. Therefore, this strategy has been selected as it has helped to develop a theory that shows how sustainable democracy is positioned in the 21st century based on collected data.

There are different types of research choices like mono-method (that includes either qualitative or quantitative method), mixed method (that includes both the method) and multimethod. However, this research includes *qualitative method and mono-method*. It is based on non-numerical data (Tenny et al., 2022). Such data has helped to interpret huge amount of non-numerical data related to sustainable democracy.

Furthermore, there are two categories of time studies- longitudinal and horizon. This study relies on a longitudinal time horizon and gathered data from a longer time interval. The study has utilized the secondary data from the past 5 years (2019-2024) to analyze the trends of sustainable democracy in the 21st century. Contrarily, a cross-sectional time horizon assists in obtaining data from one point of time. Since it can filter out data sources thus, it has not been chosen for this study. Certain search terms were formulated like "sustainable democracy", "democratic challenges" and others. The primary data sources are as follows.

1.Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (2023)



2. World Development Report 2017: Governance and the Law<sup>2</sup>

3. Annual Reports on Human Rights and Democracy in the World (2020–2023)<sup>3</sup>

4. Global State of Democracy Reports (2021–2024) by International IDEA<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the gathered secondary data has been analyzed using *thematic data analysis*<sup>5</sup> method. It helps to interpret the data, identify patterns, select codes and to separate similar codes under different themes (Sovacool et al., 2023). Each theme helps to answer the research questions. Likewise, thematic analysis has helped to understand the concept of sustainable democracy, challenges related to sustainable democracy and strategies to address the challenges.

Additionally, the research has followed research ethics. Every data collected from already published sources has been referenced to respect the original authors. Also, any such information has not been used which can harm any individual. Moreover, plagiarism has been avoided to maintain research integrity.

## Findings and Discussion

This study has helped to find that democracy has spread globally and it brings in justice, hope for peace and sustainability. Democracy is being propagated in authoritarian nations and the UN has continuously propagated that democracy is part of good governance. Likewise, in 2016, UN SDGs or United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals- SDG 16 (Figure1) focus on the importance of democracy for peace, justice and sustainable societies (Martin, 2023). However, currently the world is struggling with different challenges including regional conflicts, geopolitical tensions as well as rising authoritarianism that has restricted progress of democracy. War and nationalism between and within nations has weakened global unity. Systems that support global cooperation like European integration and multilateral agreements are under threat. However, global corporations are putting efforts to strengthen democracy and to maintain justice.



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Additionally, the research has helped to find that sustainable democracy includes the principle of maintaining a balance between inclusive and participatory governance structure. Its objectives are related to free market of ideas, democratic institutions, civil societies, informed citizens as well as dynamic state-society relationship. Like Poland's democratic path after 2023 shows the strength of democratic institutions when supported by civic activism. Following democratic decline under the PiS government of 2015-2023, featuring contested judicial reforms and media restrictions, Poland's October 2023 elections saw Donald Tusk's coalition come to power. The new administration has focused on rebuilding judicial independence, media pluralism, and improving relations with EU institutions. This shift demonstrates the ability of democracy to correct itself when electoral institutions are still functioning. Poland's experience, though, also underlines how polarization still threatens the sustainability of democracy since large parts of the populace are still divided on democratic ideals and institutional legitimacy. Each of these aspects contribute to the efficacy of sustainable democratic governance.

The research has helped to *find* that establishing strong democratic institutions is important for sustainable democracy. Legislative strengthening, decentralization and well-structured electoral process are crucial components. Legislative strengthening makes sure that different constituency needs are addressed,



resources are allocated accurately and conflicts are managed effectively. Likewise, it shall be *discussed* that strong legislation ensures balanced power in government branches. Decentralization improves local accountability along with democratic participation. It nurtures governance that aligns with local needs. Additionally, sustainable decentralization needs effective resource allocation to local governments (Pickering et al., 2022). Furthermore, institutionalized electoral process are crucial for transitioning governments as well as to reflect public opinion. Elections needs to coincide with economic, political and environmental resources to ensure sustainable and rational decision making.

The research has also helped *to find* that democracy flourishes on free exchange of information and ideas. "Market of ideas" encourages competition among leaders, policies and parties as well as making sure that citizens can make informed decisions (Millan, 2022). Monopolization of democratic process by a single ideology or party weakens sustainability. Thus, it shall be *discussed* that access to informed voting, access to diverse media, participating in debates and others helps citizens to engage effectively, maintain a democratic process and to prevent failure of democratic process.

In this respect another significant case study has been Finland has become an international leader in the fight against information manipulation because of its whole-of-society approach to digital literacy. Media literacy is taught across the curriculum in Finnish schools, where children learn to critically assess sources, recognize manipulation methods, and be aware of how digital ecosystems operate. This curriculum is supported by cross-sector partnerships between government ministries, media, and civil society to detect and counter disinformation campaigns. Finland's strategy prioritizes developing society's resilience over technical solutions. The nation's high rankings for press freedom and low vulnerability to disinformation campaigns illustrate how investment in citizens' critical thinking capacities enhances democratic sustainability by safeguarding the information environment on which democracy relies.

Also, the research has helped *to find* that educated citizens are the backbone of sustainable democracy. Education empowers people to understand democratic principles and to demand for accountability. Thus, it shall be *discussed* that civic education helps people to understand human rights and to implant democratic values (Khunkhana, 2024). Looking at the metrics of adult literacy<sup>6</sup> and democratic quality<sup>7</sup> together reveals that many countries with very high literacy rates (99%+) also score highly on democratic indices (Nordic countries, Canada, Australia), supporting the correlation. However, exceptions exist, such as Belarus (99.7% literacy but questionable democratic institutions) and Singapore (97% literacy but weak democratic structure). Also, taking part in political demonstrations and other resistance methods helps to address the gap between democratic theory and application.

Moreover, it has been *found* that civil societies that operate between government and individuals play a crucial role in sustainable democracy as they help to promote pluralism, advocate marginalized groups and widen participation. Even when NGOs fail, civil societies and their democratic culture helps to maintain sustainable democracy. The research has also helped to understand that good governance is needed to establish a pleasant "state-society" relation. Governance that is characterized by accountability, transparency and responsiveness ensures stability and legitimacy (Shorenstein, 2024). Respecting the law helps to strengthen trust between citizens and the state, promotes equal resource allocation and reduces conflict. Mechanisms such as public hearing helps to improve conflict resolution, inclusivity and helps to enhance transparency. However, they need to be safeguarded against manipulation by interest groups. Such approaches help to maintain sustainable democracy.



Therefore, it shall be *discussed* that sustainable democracy needs persistent effort to balance civic participation, governance and resource allocation. It is a shared responsibility of developed as well as developing nations to include resilience, inclusivity and adaptability. Therefore, by promoting pluralism and informed participation and addressing inequality, sustainable democracy is crucial to address societal and environmental challenges.

## Conclusion

This study has helped to understand that democracy in the current era struggles with political, social and technological changes. It needs strong democratic institutions, inclusivity and civic engagement to address issues related to political polarization, reduced trust on governments and misinformation. Also, the study has helped to understand that democracy can be achieved through transparent processes and active participation. Therefore, it is crucial to empower citizens via equitable policies, education and access to true information. Role of technology shall also be managed to make sure that it supports democratic values. Corruption, violence, and weakened democratic institutions are all alarming signs of democratic erosion, but they are not undefeatable roadblocks. India still has fully functional elections (Jose, 2021). Also, addressing social-economic inequalities is needed to develop a cohesive framework. Thus, civil societies, government and international organizations shall collaborate to protect democratic principles especially in those regions which are struggling with authoritarian pressure and backsliding. Likewise, the research has helped to understand that interplay between global and local dynamics helps to enhance democratic outcomes.

## Limitations

This research has explored the concept of Sustainable democracy in the 21st century in depth. However, the exploration is generalized. Interpreting sustainable democracy of any particular nation could have helped to interpret the concept and approaches of sustainable democracy from depth. Modern democracies have three interlinked challenges to sustainability. First, technological disruption in the form of AI, algorithmic amplification, and computational propaganda produces information environments in which factual consensus is ever harder to achieve. Second, economic polarization erodes democratic cohesion as perceptions increase that political systems are pro-elite and populist movements build, which commonly target democratic institutions themselves. Third, geopolitical rivalry from authoritarian regimes actively engaged in subverting democratic institutions through both covert and overt actions poses external pressure on democratic sustainability. These are further exacerbated by climate change and migration pressures that challenge democratic systems' ability to sustain long-term thinking and inclusive governance during times of societal stress.

## Future Research

Evolving challenges related to sustainable democracy gives a strong ground for further research. Researchers can interpret the relation between democratic resilience and technology specially the impact of AI and digital platforms on election process or public trust. Also, comparative research on democratic backsliding in different nations can be researched on to identify patterns as well as preventive measures. Also, research on the role of civic education as well as participatory governance in developing a culture of inclusivity and accountability can be done. Role of the international government on maintaining sustainable democracy can be researched on. Research on policies and movements can be performed that can enhance



sustainable democracy globally. Such research will help to include practical strategies to maintain sustainable democracy.

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council. (2023). *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela*.

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<sup>5</sup> This analytical framework helps identify vulnerabilities in democratic systems, highlight successful approaches to strengthening democratic institutions, and develop evidence-based strategies for cultivating democracy that can endure and adapt over time.

<sup>6</sup> UNESCO data

<sup>7</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index (2023)

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