

NAVIGATING GENDER IDENTITY IN INDIA



Social and Cultural Perspectives
on Gender Sustainability

Dhishna Pannikot

Navigating Gender Identity in India

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Navigating Gender Identity in India: Social and Cultural Perspectives on Gender Sustainability

EDITED BY

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National Institute of Technology, Karnataka, India



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

This book is dedicated to my loving family, my besties and all social sciences and humanities enthusiasts!

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Contents

About the Editor	<i>xi</i>
About the Contributors	<i>xiii</i>
Preface	<i>xvii</i>
Acknowledgment	<i>xxiii</i>
Chapter 1 Introduction to Gender Sustainability	1
<i>Kiran Raveendran</i>	
Chapter 2 Gender Microaggressions, the Contemporary Form of Gender Bias: A Systematic Literature Review	13
<i>Priya P. and Sreejith S. S.</i>	
Chapter 3 Feminist Mobilization and Digital Feminism: Reading the Role of Digital Spaces as Catalysts for Feminist Action and Social Change	29
<i>Tanupriya</i>	
Chapter 4 Gender Stereotyping on Social Media: A Review	43
<i>Abhilasha K. Agrawal and Maithili Barahate-Paikane</i>	
Chapter 5 Navigating Gender Sustainability, Menstrual Hygiene, and Women Empowerment in Contemporary Indian Society: A Study on Select Films	57
<i>Srijani Chowdhury</i>	

Chapter 6 “Rockets” Without Destination: Gender Sustainability and Identity Challenges in Indian Sports Explored Through <i>Rashmi Rocket</i>	67
<i>Tania Koley and Joydeep Banerjee</i>	
Chapter 7 Gender Dynamics in Social Commerce: Shaping Platform Preferences and Shopping Behavior	81
<i>Soma Amol Dhaigude and Bijuna C. Mohan</i>	
Chapter 8 Challenges of LGBTQ Workplace Discrimination: A Comprehensive Analysis	95
<i>M. Subramanian, Sivajothi Ramalingam and S. Pugalanthi</i>	
Chapter 9 Does Board Gender Diversity Enhance the Sustainable Performance of Firms? Empirical Evidence From India	101
<i>Poornima S., Gopalakrishna B. V. and Mithun Samanta</i>	
Chapter 10 Requalification and Career Setbacks: Unemployment Scarring in Academia Among Middle-Aged Women	115
<i>R. Kanakasudha</i>	
Chapter 11 Scientific Mapping of Gender in Sustainable Tourism Research: A Bibliometric Approach	133
<i>Abhishek Talawar and Sheena S.</i>	
Chapter 12 He Said, She Said: Understanding Gender Variances in Factors Influencing Cognitive Dissonance in Online Shopping of Electronic Products	149
<i>Haritha S. and Bijuna C. Mohan</i>	
Chapter 13 Consent and Coercion: Re-examining Marital Rape and Gender Inequality in India’s Legal Framework	159
<i>Ajeesh A. K.</i>	
Chapter 14 Gendered Gentrification: A Case Study of Thiruvananthapuram	175
<i>Praveen P.</i>	

Chapter 15 Women Entrepreneurship and Sensitization: Analyzing the Impact of <i>Kudumbashree</i> on Economic, Social, Ecological, and Gender Sustainability in Kerala	187
<i>Indu A. S.</i>	
Chapter 16 Celebrating Bharani: Embracing Gender Sustainability Through Tradition and Culture	201
<i>Reenu George and Jibhi Bhaskaran</i>	
Chapter 17 Exploring Gender Sustainability in Khasi Society: An Analysis of Matrilineality and Women Empowerment	215
<i>Athira Baburaj</i>	
Index	225

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Preface

This book is the product of a collective work of many authors who contributed to the concept of gender sustainability in India. The idea of this book is a byproduct of the International Conference on Gender Studies which was conducted at National Institute of Technology Karnataka in Sept 2023. The immense work done in the domain of gender studies made me think of the need to address gender in terms of Gender Sustainability Development Goals of United Nations. As there is so much good work emerging in different domains of Sustainable Development, this book would definitely stand out based on the major social concerns that it addresses in the context of India. This book would help researchers, academicians, gender critics, and sociologists to gather information on gender sustainable practices in the Indian context. The emergence of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was in the 1987 when United Nations emphasized on 17 SDGs that would provide overall development to various domains in the society. The areas under the SDGs include poverty (SDG 1), hunger eradication (SDG 2), health and well-being (SDG 3), education quality (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), affordable and clean energy (SDG 7), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), climate action (SDG 13), life below water (SDG 14), life on land (SDG 15), peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16), and partnerships for the goals (SDG 17).

Gender equality is one of the major sustainability goals and also the focus of attention in this book. The ideas presented in this book under gender sustainability include different aspects of gender that focusses on gender in the context of sociocultural identities of India. The ideas depicted in this book reflect independent research conducted by the contributors in various domains of gender sustainability. The first chapter introduces gender sustainability and sustainability goals and discusses the conceptual clash between the term gender and sustainability, providing a comprehensive approach toward the terms. The chapter focuses on the economic, social, and also natural aspects that attribute identities to people. The chapter presents various domains including educational access, health, civic aspects, and cultural conventions. Aspects including gender, race, class, age, and geography are taken into consideration. The concept of intersectionality is given emphasis in the context of understanding gender sustainability.

The second chapter discusses gender microaggressions toward women as a contemporary form of gender bias. The chapter presents microaggressions as

verbal, behavioral and environmental that tries to denigrate women. The chapter is based on systematic literature review of articles in Scopus data base conducted using key words that define gender microaggressions specifically on women in the database. This study found a dearth of research on women, especially in Asia. The different aspects of gender microaggressions based on occurrences and severity and coping mechanisms adopted by women for a toxic-free environment are discussed in this chapter.

The third chapter focuses on feminist mobilization and digital feminism providing insights on how digital spaces provide catalyst for feminist action and social change. The chapter focuses on the transformative impact that digital media has on feminist representation, activism, and women's interaction in the context of digital spaces. The chapter further explores how female self-representation can provide emancipation and social change in the Indian context. The problems like online harassment are addressed in this context. The chapter also discusses how multiple voices coexist and provide space for women's wellness. The discussion moves between the digital platforms, women's experiences in online platforms, and feminism to provide sustainable opportunities for women.

Chapter 4 discusses gender stereotyping in media and its impact on Indian society using existing literature that portrays gender representations in media. This chapter focuses on how media provides social support to the marginalized people, on the other hand stereotypes people based on gender. It provides insights on how women are commodified through media and how this situation has to be addressed in providing gender sustainability for women.

Chapter 5 analyzes two Indian films, *Period. End of Sentence* (2018) and *Pad Man* (2018), as cultural texts to understand the intersection of gender equity and SDGs. This chapter uses film as a medium to present the stigma surrounding menstruation by advocating accessible and affordable menstrual hygiene products. The films underscore the necessity of inclusive policies aligning SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) by promoting women's physical and mental health and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) by emphasizing the economic empowerment of women. The discussion highlights these films' contributions in raising awareness and fostering changes in the realms of menstrual hygiene management (MHM) and women's empowerment in rural India.

Chapter 6 examines the representation of the Indian sports in Indian Bollywood movie *Rashmi Rocket* (2021), directed by Akarsh Khurana to expose the complexity of gender identity in sports. As media, particularly sports media, plays a significant role in shaping society, it can influence both positive and negative changes, given the strong impact of sport on public perception, through a critical evaluation of media representations, this study explores the challenges faced by individuals in sports.

Chapter 7 investigates the influence of gender on consumer behavior within SC environments, focusing on how it shapes preferences, engagement, and purchasing decisions. With platforms like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Snapchat, TikTok, and WhatsApp playing a growing role in online shopping, understanding the gender-specific dynamics is essential for businesses and marketers aiming to optimize their strategies.

Chapter 8 examines the challenges of workplace discrimination against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) individuals, focusing on a sample of 20 participants. The research aims to shed light on the complex issues faced by LGBTQ employees in different professional settings. Using qualitative methods such as interviews, surveys, and case studies, the study investigates the intricate dynamics of discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Chapter 9 explores the link between board gender diversity and corporate sustainability practices. The study employs 417 Indian companies to investigate how the incorporation of corporate sustainability programs and gender diversity on the board of directors interrelate the findings showing that companies with a higher proportion of female directors enhance sustainable initiatives by taking favorable decisions to address environmental issues, social welfare concerns, and governance problems.

Chapter 10 focuses on the requalification and career setbacks due to unemployment scarring in academia among middle aged women in Chennai, a district in Tamil Nadu state of India. The chapter describes the gap in employment among the labor force after COVID-19 in India. The data show declining participation of urban women especially middle-aged women in labor force. The lack of upskilling and solutions to avoid unemployment is discussed along with the psychological effects that India women faced. The unemployment among women in academia after requalifying and upskilling is given attention, and the competition that exists with younger generation of women is focused through this explanatory research. Methods to minimize this problem in the form of government policies are further given emphasis.

Chapter 11 discusses a bibliometric analysis of articles focusing on gender and sustainability in tourism research to elucidate publication trends, identify influential journals and prominent authors, and uncover key research themes and emerging hotspots of research trends. The Bibliometrix R package was employed to analyze 438 research articles selected from the Scopus database between the period 2015 and 2024.

Chapter 12 focuses on understanding gender variances in factors influencing Cognitive Dissonance in online shopping of electronic products. The study employs quantitative research design, collecting data from 716 online shoppers through a structured survey across tier I cities of India. Cognitive dissonance was measured using a validated scale that assessed postpurchase regret, doubt, and discomfort. This chapter highlights the gender-neutral nature of cognitive dissonance in online shopping for electronic products. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on consumer behavior in digital contexts, emphasizing the importance of universal strategies to alleviate postpurchase dissonance.

Chapter 13 examines the historical, cultural, and legal foundations of marital rape immunity in India, tracing its roots to colonial-era doctrines and exploring the societal resistance to recognizing sexual violence within marriage. By analyzing the impacts of intimate partner violence, the study highlights the severe physical, psychological, and emotional consequences faced by survivors. The chapter further critiques modern defenses of the marital rape exemption, addressing arguments

around privacy, the potential for false accusations, and the challenges of proving such cases from the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (formerly the Indian Penal Code). The study calls for urgent legal reforms, advocating for the criminalization of marital rape as a necessary step toward ensuring gender equality and upholding women's constitutional rights to dignity, autonomy, and safety.

Chapter 14 provides insights on gender gentrification in the context of Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala, a State in India. The increased urbanization of geographies has an impact on gender and sex ratio. This chapter focuses on how the sociologists and urban planners need to focus on aspects like Magentrification and Fegentrification while understanding gentrification in urban locations. This study specifically focusses on the urban landscape of Thriuvanathapuram, based on ethnographic methods of studying, and interpreting the social conditions and gender sustainability in this locality.

Chapter 15 examines the relevance of understanding the key factors that inspire women to be a part of grassroot initiatives like Kudumbashree Units, a grassroot movement in Kerala, a state in India, that owes a consequential part in establishing and enhancing the social and political status of the under privileged women in the Kerala. It analyzes how Kudumbasree activities contributed to women's empowerment, alleviation of poverty, improvement of financial situation and social activities, and developments done by women through its organizational setup. It is quite effective for providing trainings, self-employment opportunities and gives necessary resources, and facilitates to promote micro-entrepreneurship among poor women.

Chapter 16 gives an insight into how the traditional gender roles are challenged and subverted in the ritualistic space and how the current interpretations of gender sustainability can be read into the festival celebrated in the sacrosanct space by involving broader gender expressions like gender fluidity. The study focuses on Kodungalloor Bharani, a temple festival in Kodungallor, Kerala, a state of India. This study attempts to explore the intersection of cultural traditions and concepts of gender sustainability using Bharani as the reference point. It also looks at how gender roles are performed during the Bharani festival, particularly in the participation of men, women, and transgenders in the ritualistic performances.

Chapter 17 focuses on exploring gender sustainability in Khasi society, a North Eastern community in India, through an analysis of matrilineality and empowerment. This study is specifically focusing on the tribal experiences and empowerment through a matrilineal inheritance system. The chapter focuses on gender equity and autonomy that the Khasi women have. The evolution of women empowerment in traditional societies is given profound importance in the study. The independence that women face in decision-making, mobility, and the crucial roles that they perform within the Khasi society is given emphasis. A sustainable and equitable gender landscape, driven towards empowerment and policy oriented, is presented through this chapter.

This book provides a comprehensive understanding of gender sustainability in relation to the SDGs in India. The studies presented in the chapters are independent and socio-centered and provides individual opinions and responses by the contributors to gender issues and identities presented in the Indian society. These studies would further provide insights to future researchers who are interested in studying gender in the context of sustainable societies in India.

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I thank my husband Mr Mugesh R, my parents Mr. Dharmadas P and Ms. Remani C, my elder brother Mr Deepak Pannikot, and my friends for their encouragement in materializing this book. My heartfelt thanks to all the contributors without whose support, this book would never have attained its galore. Special thanks to Mr Kiran Raveendran, Ms. Athira, Mr Supthitha Pal, and Mr Anand Abraham for all the support and assistance provided for this work. Thanks to the reviewers for your meticulous suggestions that improvised this work. Special thanks to the editorial team of Emerald publishers for the suggestions and assistance and making this book a reality!

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Chapter 1

Introduction to Gender Sustainability

Kiran Raveendran

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Abstract

Gender sustainability integrates the principles of gender equity with sustainable development. It emphasizes equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for all genders, influencing a nation's progress in achieving long-term ecological, economic, and social well-being. The United Nations' sustainability objectives in 1987 propelled this growing emphasis by redefining sustainable development as meeting the current demands while safeguarding the resources and opportunities required by future generations. These aspirations are encapsulated in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) manifesting various areas. Therefore, this chapter introduces a thematic structure that captures the productive tensions between the concepts of "gender" and "sustainability," developing a framework that aligns gender equality (SDG 5) with all the SDGs for a more comprehensive approach to sustainability. The theoretical synthesis assimilates feminist sociology and intersectionality, highlighting the importance of considering multiple identities and holistic approaches in sustainability efforts. This framework offers a foundation for policies, practices, and research and is crucial for unveiling the discursive construction of gender as well as the analysis of reproductions of inequalities at global, national, or everyday life levels. This chapter begins with defining the key concepts: gender as the social and cultural attributes associated with being male, female, or queer and sustainability as the maintenance of ecological, economic, and social systems over the long term. It further explores interwoven topics like economic autonomy, educational access, health equity, civic engagement, and cultural conventions, demonstrating the reciprocal influence of unsustainable environmental effects that distribute unevenly and reproduce intersectional inequalities based on gender, race, class, age, and geography.

Keywords: Gender sustainability; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); feminism; equality; intersectionality

Introduction

Gender equality forms the foundation of achieving social, environmental, and economic sustainability. When gender inequality persists, it not only undermines economic productivity but also adversely impacts the quality of life for individuals across various spheres. Given this critical role, the pursuit of gender equality and sustainability are thus inextricably linked, representing two of the most pressing challenges facing the global community today. Addressing these challenges in tandem is not only a moral imperative but also a practical necessity for securing a prosperous and equitable future for all. Dominant development models have all too often prioritized economic growth over social and environmental well-being, resulting in patterns of unsustainable resource extraction and utilization that disproportionately burden women and marginalized groups. Conversely, empowering women and promoting gender equality can serve as a powerful catalyst for sustainability, as women frequently play central roles as caregivers, subsistence farmers, and community leaders at the forefront of environmental stewardship.

By centering gender justice within sustainability frameworks, it is possible to unlock the synergistic trails that enhance resilience, biodiversity, and equitable access to essential resources like food, water, and clean energy. Therefore, the notion of “Gender sustainability” captures the productive tension between the two terms integrating the principles of gender equity with sustainable development. It incorporates a framework that aligns “gender equality” (Sustainable Development Goal [SDG 5]), with all the SDGs for a more comprehensive approach to sustainability thereby emphasizing equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for all genders, influencing a nation’s progress in achieving long-term ecological, economic, and social well-being. Integrating these complementary agendas is essential for charting a course toward a more sustainable and just world.

Frequently, sustainable development is perceived mainly as environmental sustainability, which limits the understanding of the broader social, economic, and ecological dimensions that must be accounted for. This narrow view often neglects critical gender concerns, effectively sidelining the essential contributions of women. With the ongoing discussions leading up to the post-2015 development agenda and the formulation of SDGs, there exists a crucial opportunity to embed a gender perspective in the understanding and implementation of sustainable development. Therefore, there is a need to integrate perspectives on the importance introducing concept of “gender sustainability.” This integration is essential to develop inclusive frameworks that address the needs and rights of all individuals, regardless of gender.

A foundational concept in sustainable development, as defined by the Brundtland Report “Our Common Future” (Brundtland, 1987), highlights the importance of meeting current needs in a way that does not compromise the ability

of future generations to meet theirs. Sustainability encompasses the balance between social, economic, and environmental needs, with a clear recognition that achieving these goals requires inclusive participation from all genders. Therefore, gender sustainability, in this context, refers to the creation of a social framework where individuals, regardless of gender, can access equal opportunities, rights, and resources. Breaking free from rigid gender norms enables societies to foster diversity, encourage participation from all genders in decision-making processes, and promote equitable growth. Achieving gender sustainability is not just a moral imperative but also a critical factor in building resilient, just, and sustainable communities.

The concept of gender varies across different epistemological traditions but was originally developed to provide an analytical distinction between the biologically determined category of “sex” and “gender,” as a social and cultural construct. Therefore, understanding gender as a construct is crucial to the conversation on sustainability and sustainable development. Judith Butler (1990), in her seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, argues that gender is a social construct rather than a biological given. She suggests that gender identity is performative, formed through repeated actions and societal pressures, rather than being an innate characteristic. This perspective reveals that gender roles are not static; they are shaped and perpetuated by cultural narratives and institutional forces, allowing for fluidity and change over time. Despite being socially constructed, gender is deeply personal, experienced emotionally and psychologically by individuals. Michel Foucault’s (1977) ideas on power and discourse further illuminate how societal norms compel individuals to align with specific gender roles, often tied to entrenched expectations. However, the term “gender” has often been used empirically as an unproblematic, statistical categorization of men and women. In the 2030 Agenda, it also functions as a policy concept aimed at achieving specific forms of equality between these two groups.

Major sustainability frameworks, including the United Nations SDGs, explicitly address gender equality as a fundamental element of sustainable development. Since its establishment and adoption by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015 (United Nations, 2015), the 2030 Agenda and its 17 interconnected global SDGs have been increasingly referenced in policies across various political levels, ranging from local and regional authorities to national governments. SDG 5 defines “gender equality” as a political objective centered on three key aspects: enhancing women’s representation in parliament, ensuring girls’ and women’s access to education, and fostering women’s empowerment across various domains. The goal explicitly aims to achieve gender equality and empower women, recognizing their critical role in sustainable practices. It emphasizes inclusivity, equity, and the dismantling of systemic inequalities. The integration of gender perspectives in sustainability is not merely a matter of justice but also of efficacy. Research shows that empowering women and promoting gender equality can lead to better environmental outcomes, as women often bear the brunt of environmental degradation yet possess unique knowledge and skills for resource management. This intersectionality is essential for developing strategies that are both equitable and effective in achieving sustainability goals.

Women constitute approximately half of the global population and are essential players in managing natural resources, particularly in rural settings where they disproportionately bear the responsibilities for food production, water management, and energy consumption. In India, the roles of women and men are influenced by social constructs, which often result in inequalities that persistently disadvantage women. This disparity hampers their ability to participate effectively in economic activities and decision-making processes, ultimately undermining the progress toward comprehensive SDGs. By addressing these gender inequities, societies can unlock the potential of women as key agents of change, thereby advancing economic growth and promoting environmental sustainability.

Addressing these challenges in tandem is not only a moral imperative but also a practical necessity for securing a prosperous and equitable future for humankind. Dominant development models have all too often prioritized economic growth over social and environmental well-being, resulting in patterns of unsustainable resource extraction and utilization that disproportionately burden women and marginalized groups. Conversely, empowering women and promoting gender equality can serve as a powerful catalyst for sustainability, as women frequently play central roles as caregivers, subsistence farmers, and community leaders at the forefront of environmental stewardship. By centering gender justice within sustainability frameworks, this chapter aims to unlock synergistic trails that enhance resilience, biodiversity, and equitable access to essential resources like food, water, and clean energy. Integrating these complementary agendas is essential for charting a course toward a more sustainable society.

Integrating the principles of gender equity with SDGs the term “gender sustainability” emphasizes on equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for all genders, influencing a nation’s progress in achieving long-term ecological, economic, and social well-being. The United Nations’ sustainability objectives in 1987 propelled this growing emphasis by redefining sustainable development as meeting “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987). These aspirations are encapsulated in the 17 SDGs manifesting various areas such as poverty (SDG 1), hunger eradication (SDG 2), health and well-being (SDG 3), education quality (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), affordable and clean energy (SDG 7), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), climate action (SDG 13), life below water (SDG 14), life on land (SDG 15), peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16), and partnerships for the goals (SDG 17).

In the context of sustainability, gender roles significantly shape how resources are managed and conserved. Traditionally, women have been viewed as primary caregivers and custodians of their environments due to their close relationships with natural resources. However, the understanding of these roles has expanded to recognize that both women and men can contribute uniquely to sustainable practices, fostering a more cooperative approach to environmental stewardship. Gender equity, therefore, plays a crucial role in the attainment of the SDGs, with

each goal requiring female empowerment and participation for effective implementation. For instance, SDG 5 emphasizes achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, which is foundational for the success of other goals like education (SDG 4), health (SDG 3), and economic growth (SDG 8). The challenges posed by gender inequity, such as limited access to education and economic opportunities, adversely impact the ability to achieve these interconnected goals, emphasizing that progress in one area often hinges on advancements in gender equity.

Investing in gender equity yields multiple benefits that are integral to sustainable development. For example, improved gender equality leads to better health outcomes for families and communities, exemplified by reduced child mortality rates when women have access to education and healthcare. Furthermore, women's participation in the workforce boosts economic productivity and innovation, contributing to sustainable economic growth. The empowerment of women enhances social cohesion and community resilience, which are essential for meeting environmental sustainability goals, as women's unique perspectives and roles in resource management can drive more sustainable practices.

The interrelation between gender equity and sustainability has gained significant recognition, with ecofeminist theories serving as a foundational perspective that highlights the roles of both women and men in environmental stewardship. While earlier ecofeminist narratives simplistically linked women's biological connections to nature, the ongoing evolution of research has opened avenues for inclusivity and nuanced discussions around sustainable practices. Beginning in the 1980s, ecofeminist theories proposed an inherent connection between women and nature, suggesting that women's roles in reproduction naturally aligned them more closely with environmental conservation efforts. Scholars perceived women as both victims of ecological degradation and custodians responsible for its preservation. However, critiques of early ecofeminism emphasize its tendency to reduce women to a homogeneous category, ignoring the interplay of factors such as race, class, and geographical context in shaping individual relationships with the environment. Additionally, these theories often failed to account for men's interactions with nature and sustainability, which are vital for a comprehensive understanding of gendered environmental issues. This critique underscores the necessity of a more balanced approach that values inputs from all genders.

Conversations around gender and sustainability also address the socioeconomic disparities that impact sustainable development efforts. The higher the socioeconomic disparities within an urban area, the bigger the obstacles for building smart and sustainable cities (Höjer & Wangel, 2015). This highlights the necessity to incorporate gender perspectives in sustainability strategies to ensure that both women and men have equal opportunities to participate in resource management and address climate challenges.

Challenges and Pathways for Gender Sustainability in India

In India, gender equity remains a critical focus area as the country pursues its development goals. Women's participation in labor and decision-making processes

has the potential to significantly influence economic growth and development outcomes. For instance, research suggests that increasing the female-to-male ratio in the workforce could substantially enhance per capita net domestic product. Despite legal frameworks supporting gender equality, cultural norms and economic barriers continue to inhibit women's full participation in society, affecting India's ability to meet its SDGs effectively.

The Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) evaluates gender parity across four primary dimensions: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. Despite some progress in education and health indices, Indian women still experience substantial barriers regarding economic participation and political empowerment. The global gender gap in 2024 highlights significant disparities and slow progress in achieving gender equality, revealing ongoing inequalities across various aspects related to multiple SDGs, including health (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), and responsible production and consumption (SDG 12). With a current score of 68.5%, indicating that 31.5% of the gap remains unaddressed, the journey toward gender parity appears extended, with projections suggesting it could take 134 years to achieve full equality at the current rate (WEF, 2024). This timeline far exceeds the aspirations set by the 2030 UN agenda of SDGs, emphasizing the need for accelerated action to meet gender equality targets within the specified timeframe. The marginal improvement of only 0.1% points from 2023 underscores the urgency for more effective measures and policies to close this gap. India occupies a dismal position in the GGGI, ranking 129th out of 146 countries as of the latest reports. Furthermore, this low ranking is a critical indicator of various structural and cultural issues that contribute to gender disparity in India. These fact-based observations highlight the necessity for systemic reforms to enhance the position of women in India and bring it in line with international norms.

The GGGI (WEF, 2024) data indicate that the largest gender gaps persist in Political Empowerment, with a staggering 77.5% of this area remaining unaddressed. This statistic suggests that women continue to face significant barriers to political representation and participation. Achieving gender parity in political spaces is essential for fostering inclusive governance and ensuring that women's voices and perspectives are incorporated into decision-making processes. Moreover, in terms of political empowerment, the representation of Indian women in policymaking and governance remains significantly low, despite the constitutional guarantees (106th Amendment) Constitution Act, 2023. The electoral landscape is predominantly male-dominated, with women often facing societal and institutional barriers that hinder their participation. Initiatives such as gender quotas in local governance have been introduced to address this imbalance, yet their impact has been limited in many regions. For instance, while women constitute a significant portion of the electorate, their representation in decision-making roles, particularly at higher levels of governance, continues to lag.

India's GDP growth has exhibited resilience amid recent global economic fluctuations and domestic challenges. As of 2024, the GDP growth rate is projected to be around 6.7%, reflecting a recovery sustained by strong consumer demand and reforms aimed at improving the business environment. The contribution of the

services sector to GDP has continued to expand, now accounting for approximately 55% of the total, while agriculture's share has further declined, emphasizing the ongoing shift toward a more service-oriented economy. Urbanization rates have also increased, reaching about 35%, as more people migrate to urban centers for better employment opportunities. Furthermore, significant strides have been made in women's education and empowerment, with female literacy rates now at around 70% and women's participation in the labor force increasing, although still lagging behind men. While educational attainment has improved for women in India, access to quality education and opportunities remains uneven, particularly in rural areas.

Economic Participation and Political Empowerment

In the domain of economic participation, Indian women encounter challenges that hinder their full engagement in the workforce. Cultural norms often restrict women's roles to domestic spheres, which exacerbates the economic gender gap. India's efforts to improve women's economic participation have led to the implementation of several significant policies. The National Policy for Women, established in 2016, serves as a framework to ensure women's rights and promote their equal participation in the workforce. It emphasizes social, economic, and political equality for women in various spheres of life, which is critical for their economic participation in society. This policy seeks to address the structural barriers that limit women's opportunities and promotes inclusive growth. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) provides rural households with guaranteed wage employment, ensuring one-third of jobs are reserved for women, thus empowering them economically. Skill development initiatives enhance women's employability through vocational training, while the promotion of self-help groups facilitates financial inclusion and entrepreneurship. Additionally, financial inclusion programs, such as the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, aim to provide women access to banking services, further supporting their economic engagement. Overall, these policies collectively aim to address systemic barriers and foster greater economic participation of women in India.

Effective implementation of evidence-based policies to increase Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP) and women's economic activity can significantly bolster economic growth in India (Fletcher et al., 2017). Evidence suggests that misallocation of talent in the labor market, particularly where high-ability women are relegated to low-skilled, low-return occupations, hinders growth potential in various economies. Addressing this misallocation through targeted policies could unlock a wealth of talent and elevate productivity levels across sectors.

In the Indian context, research indicates that improving FLFP could have quantifiable effects on economic performance. Specifically, Esteve-Volart (2004) calculated that a 10% increase in the female-to-male ratio of workers would lead to an 8% increase in per capita net domestic product. This statistic highlights the substantial economic returns that can arise from fostering greater gender parity in

the workforce. To harness the potential benefits of increased FLFP, policymakers must focus on creating an environment conducive to female participation in the labor force. Strategies may include enhancing access to education and vocational training, alleviating barriers to entry in various sectors, and promoting family-friendly workplace policies to support working women. These measures are crucial for building an inclusive labor market that can drive sustained economic growth.

The normative understanding of work, which often renders reproductive labor invisible, reflects a dominant discourse on empowerment that emphasizes productive labor, economic self-sufficiency, and a neoliberal ideology of individualism. From a feminist perspective, resisting the stereotypical portrayal of women as primarily mothers and caregivers is crucial – challenging the notion that their lives and purpose are defined by self-sacrifice for others' well-being, often at the cost of their own health, resources, and freedom. However, it is equally important to critique the limitless exploitation of women's regulated labor, ensuring that efforts toward gender equality do not inadvertently reinforce neoliberal economic narratives centered on growth at the expense of genuine equity and well-being.

The systematic exclusion of women from political life has significant implications for their representation and, consequently, their performance in political roles. [Hussain \(2022\)](#) highlights the scarcity of literature addressing this issue and examines Indian women's engagement in activities such as debates, deliberations, and questioning on the parliamentary floor. Nevertheless, the Women's Reservation Act 2023 is a landmark initiative aimed at increasing gender inclusivity in Indian politics, which sought to reserve one-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and in all state legislative assemblies exclusively for women. By providing this reservation, the bill intends to bridge the significant gender gap in political representation, which has historically marginalized women from active participation in the decision-making process.

One-third of seats is further reserved for women from Scheduled Castes and Tribes, as outlined in the amendment to Articles 330A and 332 of the Constitution, is undoubtedly a commendable step. However, its success in addressing the multifaceted challenges of women's political empowerment remains uncertain. The complexities of hierarchical structures and sociopolitical dynamics continue to influence the extent to which women can effectively realize their political potential. While the legislative introduction of reservations marks an encouraging beginning, in a diverse and stratified nation like India, this measure must be complemented by efforts to enhance women's capacity to exercise political agency at all societal levels. Empowering women to make autonomous political choices and participate actively in core decision-making processes is essential for translating reservations into meaningful and sustained political progress.

Education and Health Factors

Identifying systemic indicators, such as levels of participation or exclusion in education and economic activities, along with social indicators like gender-based