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A study on women's empowerment and sustainable development in India

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Abstract

This study investigated the interconnections between women's empowerment and sustainable development in India. Women's empowerment is crucial for sustainable development, as it significantly influences economic growth, social progress, and environmental sustainability. Gender equality is prominently emphasized in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5, which aims to empower women and girls. In India, women have historically faced marginalization due to entrenched social norms, encountering barriers in education, employment, and political participation. Recent policy initiatives have improved women's roles across sectors, with microfinance empowering rural women by providing financial resources, fostering entrepreneurship, and enhancing their social status. However, challenges persist in achieving gender parity, particularly in terms of political representation and access to education and health care. This study underscores the need for comprehensive and culturally nuanced approaches that combine policy reforms, educational enhancements, and efforts to shift entrenched cultural norms. Strengthening education, skill development, legal protection, and the promotion of women in leadership roles are key recommendations for advancing gender equality. Partnerships between corporations and civil society can promote inclusive practices and initiatives to advance women's progress and equality in the workplace. By integrating gender considerations across all Sustainable Development Goals, India can make significant progress in empowering women and achieving sustainable development. Future research should evaluate the long-term impact of specific initiatives and develop strategies that consider cultural differences to overcome deep-rooted gender norms.

Keywords: Women's empowerment, sustainable development, gender equality, India, United Nations, sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), microfinance, entrenched social norms, etc.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

A comprehensive examination of women's empowerment and sustainable development in India elucidated the intricate interconnections between gender equality and developmental objectives. Women's empowerment is pivotal for sustainable development and exerts a substantial influence on economic growth, social progress, and environmental sustainability. Gender equality is prominently emphasized in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5, which aims to empower women and girls. This emphasis is supported by evidence indicating that empowering women enhances human capital, increases labour productivity, and reduces poverty (Onditi and Odera, 2020; Onditi and Odera, 2016) ^[50, 51]. The transition from the Millennium Development Goals to SDGs has integrated gender equality across various sectors (Fredman *et al.*, 2016; Dhar, 2018) ^[15, 12]. In India, women have historically faced marginalization due to entrenched social norms, encountering barriers in education, employment, and political participation (Kumar & Shobana, 2023) ^[24]. Recent policy initiatives have improved women's roles across sectors (Reshi and Sudha, 2022) ^[39]. Microfinance empowers rural women by providing financial resources, fostering entrepreneurship, and enhancing their social status (Paul 2025) ^[34]. Nonetheless, challenges persist in achieving gender parity, particularly in terms of political representation and access to education and healthcare (Kumar & Shobana, 2023; Hasan, 2024) ^[24, 19]. Addressing these issues requires policies that prioritize women's rights in development planning (Dhar, 2018) ^[12]. Gender equality is a critical component of both global and Indian development discourses, particularly concerning women's empowerment and sustainable development. The SDGs, established by the United Nations in 2015, position gender equality as essential for achieving other SDGs in education, employment, healthcare,

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and political participation (Shang *et al.*, 2022) ^[52]. The SDGs have improved upon the Millennium Development Goals, which inadequately address gender equality due to entrenched societal norms (Fredman *et al.*, 2016; Onditi and Odera, 2016) ^[15, 51]. In India, gender equality and women's empowerment are vital to economic growth and sustainable development. Gender parity in health, education, and employment positively influences economic growth (Mishra *et al.* 2020) ^[53]. Despite advancements in women's civil liberties and political participation in India, challenges remain in the economic sphere and gender-based violence. Cultural norms continue to impede transformative change (Anderson, 2024) ^[6]. Gender equality serves as both an independent goal and a means to achieve economic stability, poverty reduction, and human development (Lima and Guedes, 2024) ^[26]. There is an increasing emphasis on implementing strategies that incorporate women's empowerment into global justice efforts (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015) ^[54]. Addressing societal norms and creating systemic changes that empower women remains crucial. Integrating gender equality with sustainable development policies can advance gender justice and contribute to economic and social progress both globally and within India (Lima and Guedes, 2024; Anderson, 2024) ^[26, 6].

2. Research Problem

Despite notable advancements, gender disparities continue to impede sustainable development in the context of women's empowerment in India. Various structural and cultural factors contribute to these disparities. First, although India has experienced significant economic progress and initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality, these efforts frequently fall short of addressing the entrenched gender norms and inequalities. Research indicates that India ranks poorly in terms of gender equality on a global scale, with particularly low scores in areas related to economic resources and protection against gender-based violence. This is despite improvements in civil liberties and political participation of women (Anderson, 2024) ^[6]. Furthermore, microfinance and sustainable entrepreneurship programs have played a crucial role in advancing women's empowerment by enhancing their economic independence, decision-making power, and social status. However, challenges remain in ensuring that these benefits reach a broader population, which is essential for sustainable and inclusive economic development (Paul 2025) ^[34]. Organizational- and policy-level challenges often prevent rural women from realizing the potential benefits of skill development and job opportunities. This gap is exacerbated by the lack of industrial and commercial setups in rural areas, which hinders the recognition of the remunerative skills necessary for women's empowerment (Gupta *et al.*, 2024) ^[17]. Education has emerged as a critical factor for women's empowerment. Studies have demonstrated that educational levels significantly influence women's autonomy, mobility, and attitudes towards gender equality and domestic violence. However, there are significant differences in empowerment indicators across various states and socio-economic settings, indicating that disparities are not only entrenched but also multifaceted (S. Gupta & Bhaskar, 2016) ^[55]. In the broader South Asian context, women remain disadvantaged in accessing their rights, further impeding the attainment of the gender equality goals established by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To address these issues, efforts are needed to improve women's social and political rights and to ensure their full inclusion in mainstream

development processes. Achieving gender equality requires a long-term approach involving cultural, social, and economic reforms aimed at addressing the root causes of gender inequality (Hasan, 2024) ^[19]. Thus, while strides have been made in promoting women's empowerment and sustainable development, persistent gender disparities continue to present significant challenges. Addressing these disparities requires comprehensive and culturally nuanced approaches that combine policy reforms, educational enhancements, and efforts to shift the entrenched cultural norms. Only by addressing these multidimensional issues can sustainable development and true gender equality be achieved in India.

3. Literature Review: Several studies have been conducted by scholars and researchers on various dimensions of women's empowerment and sustainable development in India over the years. A review of some of the most pertinent studies is presented below:

Anita (2020) ^[7] studied how empowering women helps in sustainable development. This study shows that gender inequality slows progress in social, economic, and political areas. It examines India's efforts to promote gender equality through laws and policies. Even with progress, Indian women still face problems, such as low literacy, less participation in work, and social biases. This study highlights the need for education, workplace changes, and legal protection to empower women. It concludes that increasing women's participation is key to achieving India's development goals and a sustainable future, in line with United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5.

Singh *et al.* (2025) ^[45] investigated the role of women's empowerment in achieving sustainable development goals in India. This study indicates that empowering women through education, economic opportunities, and legal rights is essential to societal advancement. Utilizing government reports and case studies, this research demonstrates that initiatives such as educational programs and economic schemes have improved women's status and contributed to sustainable development. This study advocates a comprehensive approach to women's empowerment in order to facilitate inclusive growth.

Poonam and Sharma (2024) ^[36] examined how empowering women affects development in poorer countries. They studied policies in different places to see how they helped with the development goals and found problems in using them. They used reviews, policy checks, and data to examine how empowerment affects growth, environment, and fairness. This study shows that empowering women is the key to development. This suggests strategies such as education, healthcare, prevention of violence against women, and economic involvement. While empowerment helps reach development goals, there are still problems in making it work. The paper states that empowerment is important for reducing poverty and protecting the environment, and calls for strong plans to fight gender inequality.

Nidhi (2021) ^[30] examined women's empowerment in India regarding Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG-5). Despite comprising half the population, women's economic participation remains limited. India's commitment to SDG-5 focuses on gender equality through constitutional amendments, property rights, and socioeconomic programs. Recent initiatives include Bachao and Padhao (2015), Yojana (2015), and Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (2016). These challenges include improving women's literacy, education, political participation, and land ownership.

Although progress has been made, further advancement is required in education, employment, and skill development. Masih and Masih (2024) ^[28] examined how empowering women can help with sustainable development. This study points out the ongoing problems that women face, such as being denied basic rights, abuse, and discrimination. Major issues include a lack of education, deep-rooted social customs, poverty, and child marriage. The authors stress the important role that women play in managing the environment and boosting the economy. This paper reviews Indian government programs such as the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme, Mudra Yojana, and Lakhpati Didi Yojana, which aim to empower women. This study calls for greater awareness of gender equality, better education for women, women-led development plans, and better execution of current programs. The paper concludes that empowering women is crucial for achieving development goals.

Chakraborty (2025) ^[11] examined the role of women's empowerment in sustainable development. This study shows that empowerment reduces poverty and improves quality of life. Women comprise half of the population, making their participation vital to the economy. This study analyses the impact of women's empowerment on sustainable development in India, using NGO reports and government data. This study defined empowerment and sustainable development by examining women's economic, social, and environmental roles. Women contribute through work, entrepreneurship, and farming, while promoting gender equality and resource management. This study assessed women's empowerment in India, noting progress and challenges, and concluded that gender equality is essential for sustainable development.

Sonowal and Moran (2019) ^[47] studied the effect of gender equality on sustainable development in India. They examined the importance of gender equality, the role of women in today's Indian society, and how education helps empower women. They find that gender equality is crucial for a sustainable world. Although women are important to development, they still face discrimination in India. Education is the key to empowering women and helping them overcome these challenges. This study suggests policy changes and educational programmes to reduce gender inequality. The authors concluded that educating women is vital for sustainable development because women comprise half of the population and are essential for sustainability.

Singh (2020) ^[46] studied the relationship between empowering women and sustainable development. This study examines the role of women in India since ancient times. Empowering women implies giving them freedom from social and economic restrictions. This study shows that when women are empowered, they can transform their countries and support sustainable development. It discusses laws that protect women's rights, such as the Hindu Succession Act and the Equal Remuneration Act. Despite progress, there are still issues related to education, lawmaking, and violence against women. The author links women's empowerment to sustainable development by referring to the United Nations 2030 Agenda. This paper argues that including women's empowerment in development plans is crucial for reducing inequality. It concludes by stating that the world must view gender equality as a fundamental human right essential for global success.

4. Research Gap

Based on the literature review, while studies have explored women's empowerment and sustainable development in

India, comprehensive research on the long-term impact of specific initiatives is lacking. Research should evaluate the outcomes of programs such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and Mudra Yojana in terms of empowerment indicators. Investigation of intersecting factors such as education, economic opportunities, and legal rights in women's empowerment and their effects on Sustainable Development Goals is needed. The analysis of regional disparities across Indian states and strategies to address challenges in literacy, workforce participation, and social bias remains crucial. Comparative studies with other developing nations can help identify the best practices in empowerment policies. These insights can help policymakers formulate effective strategies for women's empowerment and sustainable development in India.

5. Significance of the Study

The interconnection between women's empowerment and sustainable development in India is important because of their mutual influence. Women's empowerment contributes to the enhancement of human resources for economic development through financial inclusion, which, in turn, leads to increased participation in decision-making processes and improved access to social welfare schemes (Pal *et al.* 2021) ^[32]. Sustainable development is intrinsically linked to women's empowerment, as evidenced by microfinance initiatives that have transformed women's economic independence and facilitated entrepreneurship within the country's economic framework (Paul 2025) ^[34]. Despite economic advancements and reforms, India continues to face challenges in achieving gender equality, with restrictive customs hindering transformative change (Anderson, 2024; Gupta and Yesudian, 2006) ^[6, 16]. This situation aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 5, which focuses on gender equality and aims to eliminate gender-based violence and enhance access to reproductive health services (Fredman *et al.*, 2016; Dhar, 2018) ^[15, 12]. The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform policies aimed at overcoming barriers to women's empowerment by addressing socioeconomic disparities, expanding educational opportunities, and promoting financial literacy, thereby contributing to sustainable national development (Sahu *et al.* 2024) ^[41].

6. Scope of the Study

This study examines dimensions influenced by cultural, economic, and policy factors. This study explores how empowering women contributes to sustainable development goals, particularly gender equality and economic growth. Microfinance initiatives advance women's economic independence and social status in India by promoting financial inclusion and sustainable entrepreneurship (Paul 2025) ^[34]. Women's empowerment in India has faced historical constraints from societal norms and gender biases, gradually challenged by changing attitudes and supportive policies. This is evident in the increasing role of women entrepreneurs in India's economy (Kumar & Shobana, 2023) ^[24]. The integration of women's empowerment into SDG 5 emphasizes gender equality and aims to eliminate gender-based violence and promote reproductive health access (Fredman *et al.*, 2016; Dhar, 2018) ^[15, 12]. Challenges regarding the intersection of gender with caste, ethnicity, and class remain. Addressing these discriminatory layers is crucial for achieving gender equality and sustainable development in India (Haq 2013) ^[18]. This study examines how women's empowerment facilitates sustainable development and analyse its achievements and barriers.

7. Objectives of the Study

The aims of this study are (i) to analyse the status of women's empowerment in India. (ii) Examining the link between women's empowerment and sustainable development. (iii) Evaluate policies and make recommendations.

8. Materials and Methods

The present study is descriptive and qualitative in nature. The has been conducted purely based on the secondary data. The secondary data have been collected from various articles, journals, research papers, research-based publications, government reports, UN publications, other academic studies, and web resources.

9. Discussion

The discussion section has been subdivided into five subsections: the framework of women's empowerment, status of women's empowerment in India, Link between Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Development, Government Policies and Initiatives for women's empowerment, and Challenges and Recommendations of women's empowerment in India.

9.1 Conceptual Framework of Women's Empowerment

9.1.1 Concept: Women's empowerment is a complex construct that includes autonomy, agency, and access to resources, all of which are essential to achieving gender equality.

Autonomy pertains to a woman's capacity to make independent decisions and exercise control over her personal and professional lives. This concept is particularly vital in healthcare decision-making, where factors such as educational attainment, employment status, and sociocultural norms significantly influence outcomes (Idris *et al.*, 2023; Acharya *et al.*, 2010) ^[56, 57]. Furthermore, autonomy within religious contexts exhibits considerable variation; for instance, certain denominations within Christianity in Mozambique offer women greater opportunities to exercise decision-making autonomy (Agadjanian and Yabiku 2015) ^[2].

Agency refers to the mechanisms through which women exert influence over their circumstances, including decision-making capabilities, negotiation skills, and the capacity to challenge societal norms. Empowerment programs aimed at enhancing agency, particularly in the domains of health and development, have demonstrated effectiveness in impoverished regions. These programs emphasize the interaction between cognitive processes and the social environment to improve outcomes for women (Shankar *et al.*, 2018) ^[44]. Additionally, agency incorporates time-use agency, wherein strategic decisions regarding time allocation contribute to empowerment (Eissler *et al.* 2022) ^[13].

Access to Resources encompasses the availability and control of both materials and human resources. This concept extends beyond mere access and incorporates future claims to resources, which are crucial for sustained empowerment (Kabeer 1999) ^[22]. Research across various contexts has underscored the significance of addressing resource inequalities to enhance empowerment. In India, disparities in resource distribution within relationships influence contraceptive decision making, illustrating that relational power dynamics can either hinder or facilitate empowerment (Babbar *et al.* 2025) ^[9]. Moreover, in communities adhering to traditional gender norms, restricted access to productive resources negatively affects women's

economic empowerment, as evidenced in the coastal fishing communities of Bangladesh (Rahman *et al.*, 2024) ^[37].

Empowerment of women is a multifaceted and context-specific process that necessitates addressing structural inequalities and societal norms across various regions and communities.

9.1.2 Significant Dimensions

The critical dimensions of women's empowerment can be analysed in terms of economic, social, and political aspects, each of which plays an essential role in advancing gender equality and enhancing women's status across various domains.

9.1.2.1 Economic Empowerment

Employment and Financial Independence

Economic empowerment frequently entails enhancing women's access to financial resources and employment opportunities. In India, microfinance and entrepreneurship within Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have significantly contributed to women's economic and social empowerment by promoting financial independence and increasing their involvement in decision-making processes (Pandhare *et al.*, 2024) ^[33]. Furthermore, financial inclusion, as demonstrated by the necessity for bank accounts and engagement in financial decision making, plays a crucial role in advancing women's empowerment in rural India (Pal *et al.*, 2021) ^[32].

9.1.2.2 Social Empowerment

Education and Health: Education serves as a crucial catalyst for the social empowerment of women, equipping them with the necessary skills and confidence to engage comprehensively in societal development and political activities (Engida, 2021) ^[14]. It augments women's decision-making capabilities and promotes substantive participation in political and social spheres. Furthermore, the enhancement of social welfare programs and the improvement of safety perceptions regarding savings significantly contribute to empowerment (Pal *et al.*, 2021) ^[32].

Health Outcomes: Health is fundamentally connected to empowerment, although the context provided does not explicitly elaborate on this relationship. Access to healthcare services and education regarding health issues are essential components that influence empowerment by facilitating improved health outcomes and informed family planning.

9.1.2.3 Political Empowerment

Representation and Decision-Making: Political empowerment facilitates women's effective engagement in political processes and decision-making, thereby influencing policies that promote gender equality and empowerment across various sectors. In Saudi Arabia, political empowerment has been demonstrated to have a significant impact on economic and managerial empowerment, although its direct effect on social empowerment may be less pronounced (Al-Qahtani *et al.* 2020) ^[4]. Conversely, women's political participation in India underscores the disparity in empowerment levels despite progress in certain domains (Anderson 2024) ^[6].

Rights and Agency: Political empowerment encompasses the safeguarding and advancement of women's rights, thereby enabling them to exercise agency across various dimensions, including economic, political, and legal

spheres. Women's organizations are instrumental in advocating for these rights and advancing the agenda of gender equality (Sen & Mukherjee, 2014) ^[6].

In conclusion, the critical dimensions of women's empowerment encompass economic, social, and political factors that collectively enhance women's roles within society. Each dimension is interconnected and contributes to the overarching objective of achieving gender equality and women's empowerment on a global scale.

9.2 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) is dedicated to achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. This objective is intrinsically linked to numerous other SDGs, highlighting the integral role of gender equality in the pursuit of sustainable development.

Research indicates a significant interconnection between SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Achieving gender equality is essential for effective engagement in and benefits from water-related and employment initiatives, thereby enhancing the potential for sustainable tourism development and economic growth (Alarcón and Cole 2019) ^[3]. Additionally, SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) is intricately linked to SDG 5, as gender influences health outcomes through social determinants, health behaviours, and gendered responses of health systems. Efforts to advance gender equality have demonstrable impacts on health, underscoring the necessity for integrated action across these domains (Manandhar *et al.*, 2018) ^[27].

Climate change adaptation measures significantly intersect with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5. These measures present both synergies and trade-offs; while they have the potential to advance gender equality, they frequently fall short in sectors such as ocean and coastal ecosystems or poverty alleviation unless gender equality considerations are explicitly incorporated into planning and implementation (Roy *et al.*, 2022) ^[40]. The role of small businesses, particularly within the African context, underscores that heightened awareness and integration of SDG 5 can enhance gender equality in business environments, thereby supporting broader sustainable development objectives (Olubiyi *et al.*, 2022) ^[31].

Integrating gender equality across all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is essential for achieving comprehensive progress. For instance, education (SDG 4) significantly influences gender equality; conversely, gender equality can enhance educational outcomes. Furthermore, the empowerment of women can expedite progress towards other SDGs, such as poverty reduction (SDG 1) and peace and justice (SDG 16) (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2022) ^[25]. Nevertheless, despite these interconnections, awareness and implementation at the grassroots level remain challenging, particularly in business and institutional contexts (Olubiyi *et al.*, 2022) ^[31].

Advancements in gender equality facilitated by feminist mobilization have driven progress across various domains within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework. However, substantial gaps persist, particularly in sectors that are resistant to change or where political and financial obstacles remain. Ongoing efforts to integrate gender considerations across all SDGs are crucial for achieving the 2030 agenda (Sen, 2019) ^[42].

9.3 Status of Women's Empowerment in India

Women's empowerment in India encompasses multiple

dimensions, each elucidating distinct facets of advancement and persistent challenges.

9.3.1 Education: Education is pivotal for empowering women. Although India has made progress in increasing female literacy rates, significant disparities remain, particularly in rural regions and marginalized communities. Access to quality education is essential for enhancing women's opportunities and agency in society (Anderson, 2024) ^[6].

9.3.2 Economic Participation: Economic empowerment is essential for the comprehensive empowerment of women. Sociocultural norms and restricted access to economic resources frequently impede women's workforce participation. Initiatives such as self-help groups (SHGs) and microfinance programs have had a positive impact on women's economic status by granting them financial decision-making authority and access to resources. Nevertheless, these programs often exclude impoverished women, highlighting the need for more inclusive economic strategies (Mohapatra and Sahoo, 2016; Sen and Mukherjee, 2014) ^[6, 58].

9.3.3 Health: Indicators of women's health have demonstrated considerable progress in enhancing maternal health and reducing mortality rates. Nonetheless, access to health care services remains insufficient for many individuals, particularly those residing in rural areas. Health empowerment is associated with women's capacity to access essential services and make informed decisions regarding well-being (Al-Qahtani *et al.*, 2020) ^[4].

9.3.4 Political Representation: India has witnessed advancements in women's political participation, particularly through increased representation in local government bodies. Nonetheless, challenges remain at higher levels of political engagement where women frequently experience underrepresentation in parliament and decision-making positions. Political empowerment is essential for shaping policies that impact women's rights and opportunities (Sen and Mukherjee, 2014) ^[6].

9.3.5 Challenges: Despite the implementation of policy reforms and initiatives, women in India continue to encounter significant challenges, including gender-based violence, restrictive social norms, and limited access to justice. These obstacles hinder genuine empowerment and underscore the complexity of achieving gender equality. Addressing restrictive customs and enhancing women's agency are crucial for effecting transformative change (Anderson, 2024; Sen and Mukherjee, 2014) ^[6, 43]. Although India has made notable advancements in empowering women across various sectors, significant challenges persist. Policies and initiatives must be both inclusive and culturally sensitive to effectively address the diverse obstacles women encounter in achieving comprehensive empowerment.

9.4 Link between Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Development in India

Women's empowerment is fundamentally connected to sustainable development in India through several channels.

9.4.1 Economic Growth: Women's engagement in economic activities plays a crucial role in enhancing GDP. In India, microfinance initiatives have been instrumental in

promoting women's financial inclusion and societal empowerment, thereby contributing to sustainable entrepreneurship and economic growth (Paul 2025) ^[34]. This economic involvement not only elevates GDP but also fosters economic development, illustrating how women's empowerment facilitates broader economic growth in India (Huang *et al.*, 2020) ^[20]

9.4.2 Environmental Sustainability: Women play a pivotal role in the management of natural resources and the promotion of eco-friendly entrepreneurship. This relationship is particularly evident in the empowerment of women entrepreneurs who integrate environmentally sustainable practices, thereby promoting environmental stewardship and contributing to sustainable business strategies. These practices not only enhance environmental sustainability but also improve market performance, underscoring a significant connection between women's empowerment and sustainable development within environmental contexts (Windiyani *et al.*, 2024) ^[48].

9.4.3. Social Development: Women's empowerment plays a crucial role in social development, as advancements in education and health contribute to poverty alleviation. For example, education for sustainable development initiatives in India highlights social, environmental, and economic aspects, advocating for gender equality and the empowerment of women as a strategy to enhance societal outcomes (Chhokar, 2010) ^[10]. This illustrates how empowering women through access to education and healthcare can mitigate poverty and advance development goals.

9.4.4 Case Studies

Kudumbashree in Kerala: The women empowerment model implemented in Kerala serves as an exemplar of community-based, participatory strategies aimed at poverty alleviation and the empowerment of women. This model effectively integrates multiple dimensions of sustainable development, presenting a successful framework for incorporating women's empowerment into sustainable community development paradigms. The Kudumbashree initiative's strategy of harnessing women's collective strengths significantly influences both economic sustainability and social inclusion (Awan *et al.* 2019) ^[8].

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Microfinance Impact Self-Help Groups (SHGs), in conjunction with microfinance initiatives, have significantly contributed to the social and economic empowerment of women in India. These groups facilitate women's attainment of financial autonomy, enable their participation in household decision-making, and enhance their social standing. Such empowerment promotes sustainable social development, fosters economic growth at the community level, and augments the capacity for sustainable livelihood (Paul, 2025) ^[34].

The examples and findings presented underscore the critical role of women's empowerment in India as a fundamental catalyst for sustainable development across the economic, environmental, and social dimensions, thereby promoting a more inclusive and equitable society.

9.5 Government Policies and Initiatives in India

In India, governmental policies and initiatives regarding women's empowerment in the context of sustainable development encompass a range of constitutional provisions, key programs, and involvement of non-

governmental organizations (NGOs). The following is an outline derived from extant literature:

9.5.1 Constitutional Provisions

Equality Articles: Articles 14, 15, and 16 of the Indian Constitution serve as the cornerstone for gender equality. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law, whereas Articles 15 and 16 prohibit gender-based discrimination and ensure equal opportunities for public employment.

Directive Principles of State Policy: These principles serve as a framework for the state to ensure justice, as well as social, economic, and political rights, which are essential for the empowerment of women and are aligned with Sustainable Development objectives.

9.5.2 Important Schemes

- **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP):** This initiative seeks to address the declining child sex ratio and promote both the education and survival of the girl child (Ikhsan *et al.*, 2025) ^[21].
- **Mahila Shakti Kendra (MSK):** This initiative aims to empower women through community engagement, encompassing capacity building, employment generation, and enhancing women's participation in governance (Ikhsan *et al.*, 2025) ^[21].
- **Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana:** A government-endorsed savings program designed to secure financial stability for the educational and matrimonial expenses of the girl (Ikhsan *et al.*, 2025) ^[21].
- **MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act):** This legislation facilitates gender-inclusive employment opportunities, thereby promoting women's economic independence and empowerment through assured wage employment (Gupta *et al.* 2024) ^[17].

9.5.3 Role of NGOs

- **The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA):** It is a leading organization dedicated to women's economic empowerment by mobilizing them to secure their rights to employment and social security (Dhar, 2018) ^[12].
- **Azad Foundation:** This initiative is dedicated to offering vocational training and employment opportunities to underprivileged women, thereby facilitating their ability to earn a sustainable livelihood.
- **Grassroots Movements:** Numerous local and grassroots women's organizations are actively engaged in community mobilization and the promotion of awareness regarding women's rights, thereby making substantial contributions to the achievement of sustainable development goals.
- These initiatives exemplify a comprehensive strategy for empowering women in India, closely aligning with development goals through legal provisions, financial inclusion, education, and employment opportunities (Koehler, 2016) ^[23].

9.6 Challenges and Recommendations

The challenges and recommendations about women's empowerment and gender issues can be described as follows.

9.6.1 Challenges

- **Gender-based Violence:** Persistent challenges, such as

gender-based violence, constitute substantial impediments to women's safety and empowerment (Ravi *et al.*, 2017) ^[38].

- **Workplace Discrimination:** Women, particularly those in STEM and other disciplines, encounter discrimination and obstacles rooted in gender stereotypes and societal expectations. These challenges include limited access to networks and resources that are essential for career advancement (Adikaram & Razik, 2022) ^[1].
- **Low Political Representation:** Women's representation in political arenas remains suboptimal, thereby constraining their capacity to influence policymaking and governance (Perry *et al.* 2009) ^[35].
- **Implementation Failures and Policy Gaps:** Significant challenges persist in the effective implementation of policies, which are frequently attributed to a lack of awareness, inadequate funding, and insufficient political will (Zhang *et al.*, 2023) ^[49].
- **Cultural and Social Barriers:** In numerous regions globally, cultural and social ideologies impose limitations on women's roles, further impeding their participation and recognition across various sectors (Amer & Bagasra, 2013) ^[5].

9.6.2 Recommendations

- **Strengthening Education and Skill Development:** Enhancing access to education and skill development is essential for empowering women, particularly within rural and marginalized communities. The implementation of targeted training and educational programs can significantly improve women's economic participation (Nhleko *et al.* 2023) ^[29].
- **Enhance Legal Protection and Enforcement:** It is imperative to enhance and rigorously enforce legal frameworks addressing gender-based violence and discrimination. This necessitates comprehensive training of law enforcement personnel and the provision of support services for survivors (Perry *et al.*, 2009) ^[35].
- **Promote Women's Leadership Roles:** Promoting women's representation in leadership positions across various sectors can be facilitated through the implementation of quotas, mentorship programs, and the establishment of supportive environments that acknowledge and address gender biases (Adikaram & Razik, 2022) ^[1].
- **Encourage Corporate and Civil Society Partnerships:** Establishing partnerships between corporations and civil society can promote inclusive practices, allocate resources, and develop initiatives that advance women's progress and equality in the workplace (Zhang *et al.*, 2023) ^[49].

These recommendations are designed to address enduring challenges by establishing supportive systems and environments that empower women and advance gender equality.

10. Findings of the Study

Here are the key findings of the study on women's empowerment and sustainable development in India based on the above discussions

- **10.1** Women's empowerment is crucial for sustainable development in India, as it impacts economic growth, social progress, and environmental sustainability.
- **10.2** Gender equality is emphasized in the UN

Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5, in empowering women and girls.

- **10.3** In India, women have historically faced marginalization due to entrenched social norms, encountering barriers in education, employment, and political participation.
- **10.4** Recent policy initiatives have improved women's roles across sectors in India.
- **10.5** Microfinance empowers rural women by providing financial resources, fostering entrepreneurship, and enhancing their social status.
- **10.6** Challenges persist in achieving gender parity, particularly in political representation and access to education and healthcare.
- **10.7** Women's empowerment contributes to economic growth through increased labor productivity and poverty reduction.
- **10.8** Education is a critical factor in women's empowerment, influencing their autonomy, mobility, and attitudes towards gender equality.
- **10.9** There are significant differences in the empowerment indicators across various states and socioeconomic settings in India.
- **10.10** Initiatives like Self-Help Groups and microfinance programs have positively affected women's economic status and decision-making power.
- **10.11** Cultural norms and social ideologies continue to impose limitations on the roles of women in many regions of India.
- **10.12** Addressing gender-based violence, workplace discrimination, and low political representation remains crucial for women's empowerment.
- **10.13** Strengthening education, skill development, legal protection, and promotion of women in leadership roles are key recommendations for advancing gender equality.
- **10.4** Partnerships between corporations and civil society can promote inclusive practices and initiatives to promote women's progress and equality in the workplace.
- **10.15** Integrating gender considerations across all Sustainable Development Goals is essential for achieving comprehensive progress in women's empowerment and sustainable development in India.

11. Conclusion

This study examined how empowering women is connected to sustainable development in India. This indicates that empowering women is important for economic growth, social progress, and environmental health. Programs such as microfinance and self-help groups help women become financially independent and start businesses. However, challenges such as gender inequality in politics, education, healthcare, and jobs remain. Cultural norms often restrict the roles of women. Although the government has policies to promote gender equality, they are not always well implemented. Programs such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and Mahila Shakti Kendra have potential but require better execution. Education is key to empowering women and affecting their independence and views on gender equality. However, there are large differences in education across different states and social groups. To fully empower women, it is important to address gender-based violence and

workplace discrimination and increase women's political participation. Gender issues should be considered in all Sustainable Development Goals to make real progress. A comprehensive approach is needed, including stronger laws, better education and skills training, the promotion of women in leadership, and partnerships between the government, civil society, and businesses. By tackling ongoing challenges and using the available opportunities, India can make significant progress in empowering women and achieving sustainable development. Future research should examine the long-term effects of specific programmes and develop strategies that consider cultural differences to overcome deep-rooted gender norms.

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