



EDUCATIONAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA: A CONTEMPORARY POLICY ANALYSIS IN THE FRAMEWORK OF SDG-5

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ABSTRACT

Women empowerment became a fresh debatable subject once again in the context of recent attempts to pass the women reservation bill in the Lok Sabha in India in April 2026. Empowering women through education is crucial for inclusive and sustainable development, especially in relation to Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG-5), which centers on gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. This research examines the latest government initiatives in India aimed at improving women's empowerment, particularly in educational achievement. Using a descriptive-analytical research approach, this study relies on secondary data from sources such as UDISE+, government reports, and international datasets. The analysis employs a capability-based framework to evaluate how policy measures convert into real educational opportunities and results for women.

The findings show that while India has made significant progress in increasing girls' access to education, as evidenced by high enrollment at the primary and elementary levels, serious challenges persist regarding retention, progression to secondary education, and completion rates. Structural barriers, including socio-cultural attitudes, financial difficulties, digital divides, and institutional gaps, continue to hinder the effective translation of educational access into true empowerment. The research also highlights regional disparities and intersectional inequalities that intensify these challenges.

The paper concludes that achieving SDG-5 in India requires a shift from policies focused merely on access to strategies that boost capabilities, prioritising retention, digital inclusion, and socio-cultural change. It recommends introducing targeted, context-sensitive policies and improving monitoring systems to ensure that educational progress leads to lasting empowerment.

Women's Educational Empowerment, Sustainable Development Goal 5, Gender Inequality in Education, Public Policy Analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

The sustainability of national development depends significantly on empowering women, who make up nearly half of India's population. Women's empowerment encompasses economic, social, political, and educational aspects that promote greater agency, access to resources, and participation in decision-making. Among these aspects, education serves as a foundational element in improving women's capabilities and long-term socio-economic outcomes.

India's approach to women's development has shifted from welfare-focused initiatives to empowerment-driven strategies that emphasise women-led development. As a participant in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), India is committed to achieving SDG-5, focusing on gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. This study places women's educational empowerment within the SDG-5 framework and evaluates recent policy measures in India to assess their effectiveness and limitations. Despite the expansion of policies, few studies analyse the outcomes of women's educational capabilities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent studies on women's empowerment in India reveal that policies across legal, economic, health, and social sectors have produced mixed but generally positive results, though their effectiveness is influenced by patriarchal norms and local contexts. Legal reforms, such as the Hindu Succession Act (2005), have strengthened women's autonomy (Goel & Ravishankar, 2021), while improved female literacy and infrastructure have enhanced health and decision-making capabilities (Kumari & Siotra, 2023). Health schemes have increased access to services, but their use still depends on women's mobility, education, and economic status (Gebremedhin et al., 2022; RamPrakash & Lingam, 2021). Community-based initiatives, especially Self-Help Groups, have boosted social capital and leadership (Ikhar et al., 2022; Pradhan et al., 2023), but ongoing structural constraints continue to limit sustained empowerment (Ramakumar & Eapen, 2021). Despite these contributions, few studies examine women's empowerment through the lens of SDG-5, particularly concerning educational outcomes, which this study aims to address.



3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To examine recent government policies for women's empowerment in India.
- To analyse their impact on women's educational empowerment.
- To identify implementation challenges and policy gaps.
- To propose policy recommendations aligned with SDG-5.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive and analytical approach based solely on secondary data sources, including government reports such as UDISE+ and AISHE, policy documents, and international databases from the World Bank. A thematic policy analysis framework categorises initiatives across economic, social, and educational dimensions. The focus is on recent policy developments (post-2020) to provide a contemporary perspective.

5. SDG-5 FRAMEWORK AND EDUCATIONAL EMPOWERMENT

SDG-5 of the UNO aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls through nine specific targets, including eliminating discrimination, ensuring access to education, promoting leadership, and improving the use of technology. Educational empowerment is linked with several SDG-5 targets, especially:

- Target 5.1: Ending discrimination
- Target 5.4: Recognising unpaid care work
- Target 5.5: Ensuring participation in decision-making
- Target 5.6: Access to reproductive health and education
- Target 5.8: Use of enabling technologies

Aligning national policies with these targets allows for a structured evaluation of progress.

Table 1: Mapping of Major Indian Policies with SDG-5 Targets and Educational Outcomes

SDG-5 Target	Key Policy/Programme	Educational Linkage	Observed Outcomes	Key Gaps
5.1 End discrimination	Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)	Promotes value of girl child education	Improved awareness, better sex ratio at birth	Limited impact on higher education retention
5.4 Unpaid care work	National Crèche Scheme, PM Matru Vandana Yojana	Supports working mothers, enabling girls' schooling continuity	Increased institutional support for childcare	Coverage gaps in rural areas
5.5 Participation & leadership	Reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions, Women Leadership Programs	Encourages educational aspirations through role models	Rise in women's local governance participation	Limited spillover to educational attainment
5.6 Health & reproductive rights	RKSK, Poshan 2.0	Improves adolescent health, reduces dropout due to health issues	Better maternal health and awareness	Uneven access across regions
5.7 Economic resources	Stand-Up India, PMKVY	Incentivizes skill development and education	Increased female participation in skill training	Weak linkage to formal education pathways
5.8 Technology access	Digital literacy initiatives, ICT programs	Enables access to e-learning and digital education	Growing digital inclusion in urban areas	Persistent rural digital gender divide
5.9 Policy & legislation	Gender Budgeting, Mission Shakti	Enhances funding for education-related schemes	Increased allocation for women-centric programmes	Implementation and monitoring inefficiencies

Source: Author's self-design based on data from the UN and the Ministry of Education.

The mapping shows that while India has established robust policy alignment with SDG-5, translating these initiatives into lasting educational outcomes remains uneven, particularly at the secondary and higher education levels.

6. RECENT POLICY MEASURES FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Recent government initiatives in India illustrate a strong strategic alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG-5), adopting a multidimensional approach to women's empowerment across economic, social, political, and legal areas. Economic programs such as the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), Stand-Up India, and Mahila Coir Yojana aim to boost women's employability, entrepreneurship, and financial

independence, while gender budgeting has institutionalised resource allocation for women-centred programs, with allocations increasing to 9.37% in the Union Budget for 2026–27. Social sector initiatives, including Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP), NPEGEL, Mission Poshan 2.0, and RKSK, focus on improving access to education, health, and nutrition, especially for marginalised groups. Together, these policies reflect a shift toward integrated and inclusive development, stressing both access and welfare.

At the same time, efforts to enhance political participation, legal protections, and institutional accountability have further strengthened the empowerment framework. Reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions and leadership development programs



have increased women's representation in governance, while legal measures such as improved domestic violence protections, fast-track courts, and expanded legal aid services aim to safeguard women's rights. Intersectional initiatives like the Van Dhan Vikas Yojana and the Accessible India Campaign address the needs of tribal and differently-abled women, ensuring inclusivity. Furthermore, monitoring systems such as gender-responsive budgeting, the Gender Budget Statement, and the National Gender Data Portal improve transparency and support evidence-based policymaking. However, despite this comprehensive policy framework, variations in implementation and enduring socio-cultural constraints continue to limit the translation of these initiatives into lasting empowerment outcomes.

6.1 Integrated Approach: Mission Shakti is a comprehensive program for women's safety and empowerment, set to be implemented during the 15th Finance Commission period from 2021-2022 to 2025-2026.

Sambal: Safety and Security: The Sambal sub-scheme ensures women's safety through One Stop Centres (OSCs), Women Helpline (181), and the expanded Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP). It also introduces Nari Adalat, an alternative grievance redressal mechanism to address minor issues such as harassment and rights violations.

Samarthya: Empowerment: The Samarthya sub-scheme empowers women through Shakti Sadans, relief and rehabilitation homes, and Sakhi Niwas, which provide safe accommodations for working women in cities, along with Palna-Creche for the children of working women. The Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) now supports a second child if it is a girl, enhancing maternal health. It also compensates for lost wages due to pregnancy and childbirth.

The SANKALP: HEW (Hub for Empowerment of Women) operates at the district level as a single-window inter-sectoral convergence mechanism, allowing all women to access benefits from Central and State Government schemes. It serves as a central agency at the state and district levels, informing the public about various schemes and policies through grassroots awareness campaigns. While these policies demonstrate a comprehensive approach, their effectiveness varies across regions due to differences in implementation capacity, socio-cultural factors, and available infrastructure.

7. IMPACT ON WOMEN'S EDUCATIONAL EMPOWERMENT

Women's empowerment begins with education and can only be sustained through it. This discussion focuses on whether recent policy changes have made a real difference in girls' access to education in India.

The UDISE+ 2024–25 data shows that the Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) for girls is 78.5% at the primary level and 84.6% at the elementary level. This indicates strong participation in early

schooling, but the figures drop sharply to 48.6% at the secondary level and 37.6% at the higher secondary level, revealing significant retention issues. Meanwhile, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for girls in secondary education has risen from 75.51% in 2014–15 to 78% in 2023–24. This suggests a boost in overall participation, even with age and grade distortions.

According to AISHE 2022–23, total female enrolment in higher education increased from 2.07 crore in 2021–22 to 2.18 crore. The female GER also grew from 22.9% in 2014–15 to 30.2% in 2022–23, remaining higher than the male GER for five years in a row since 2018–19. However, dropout rates, which are low at the primary level, rise to 9.6% for girls at the secondary stage. Despite 88.3% of girls completing lower secondary education, this indicates some leakage in the system.

Additionally, the Gender Parity Index was 1.04 in 2022–23, while a 13.4 percentage point gender gap in adult literacy and notable regional disparities continue to affect girls' educational results.

Key trends include:

- High enrolment at foundational levels
- Increasing dropout rates at the secondary stage
- Ongoing gender gaps in adult literacy
- Regional disparities in educational outcomes

8. IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND POLICY GAPS

Many challenges remain in ensuring universal access to elementary education and improving GER in higher education for women in India.

8.1 Socio-Cultural Barriers

Deep-seated patriarchal norms still limit girls' educational goals and mobility. Even though many parents in the 21st century have become more supportive of girls' education, significant gaps remain. In some households, families prioritise quality private education for sons while sending daughters to government schools that offer free education. Additionally, many parents hesitate to let girls travel to distant places or pursue opportunities in unfamiliar or risky areas.

Within families, mothers—who often greatly influence their daughters—may lack the power, resources, or decision-making abilities to actively support their educational growth. Ongoing cultural beliefs reinforce gender bias, viewing sons as carriers of family pride, lineage, and religious traditions. In contrast, daughters are often seen as part of another family after marriage. These views continue to restrict investment in girls' education and limit their long-term prospects.

8.2 Digital Divide

Limited access to digital infrastructure greatly restricts girls' involvement in modern education. In many rural households, parents are hesitant to give girls a separate smartphone due to worries about misuse and potential social or ethical issues, but they are more likely to buy one for boys. As a result, most girls



rely on a shared family phone, which is often unavailable when parents are at work. This inconsistent access hinders them from receiving timely instructions, engaging in class WhatsApp groups, or completing assignments. As a result, they may fall behind academically and be seen as slow learners.

8.3 Economic Constraints

Financial challenges and dependency significantly affect the continuity of education. Most of the families affected belong to lower-middle- and lower-income groups, struggling to meet basic needs amid rising living costs in urban and semi-urban areas. For these families, funding higher education for girls is often seen as an extra expense—especially when combined with the anticipated costs of marriage. Consequently, many parents decide to stop their daughters' education or choose distance learning as a more budget-friendly option.

Even among middle-class families, concerns remain about the rising cost of higher education, especially at private institutions. Many rural households have limited income sources and lack vocational skills, which restricts girls' financial independence. This situation keeps many young women economically reliant until they find jobs or marry, perpetuating cycles of inequality in education and opportunity.

8.4 Institutional and Infrastructure Gaps

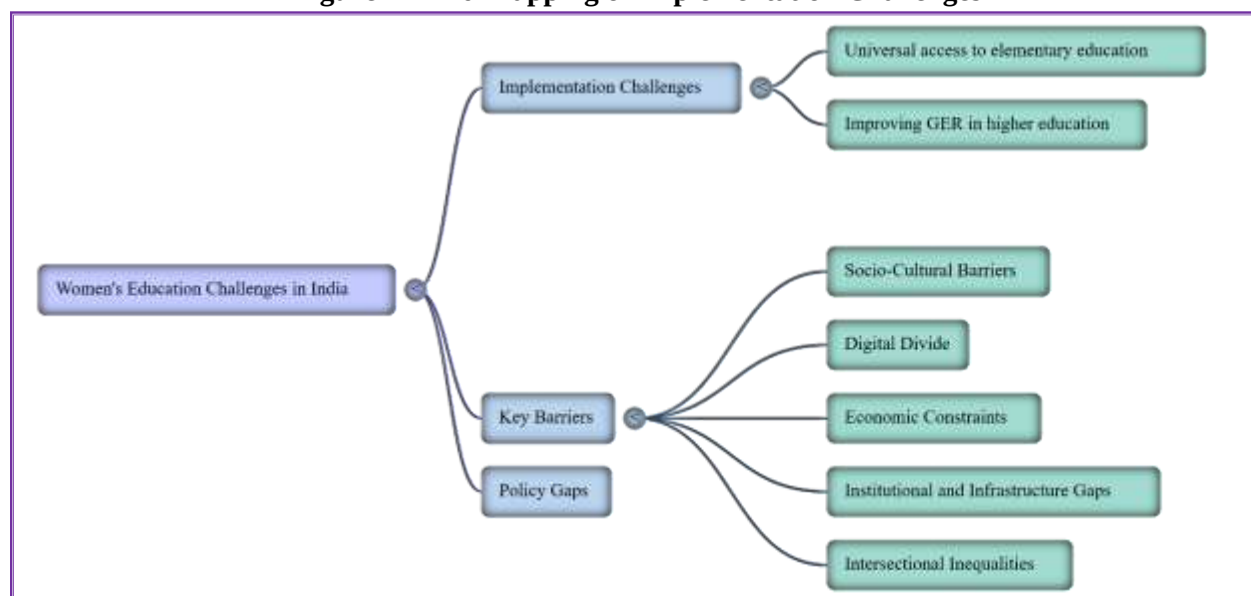
Poor school facilities, a lack of supportive environments for girls, and weak monitoring systems hurt educational outcomes. Factors like the distance to schools, poor transportation options, a shortage of hostels for girls, limited classmates from local communities, and inadequate toilet and water facilities are crucial in deciding whether girls pursue higher education. Furthermore, the safety and care offered by educational institutions significantly affect decisions made by parents and students. When these essential resources are missing, especially in rural, remote, and hilly areas, many girls are forced to skip higher education.

8.5 Intersectional Inequalities

Marginalised groups face multiple challenges due to socio-economic and geographical disadvantages. In tribal and other marginalised communities, these issues are more severe. Parents often limit girls' education to primary school and encourage them to take on traditional roles. Social pressures in the community normalise early marriage as the expected path for girls, restricting their access to higher education and personal growth.

In many of these situations, early or child marriage is a major factor disrupting educational progress and pushing girls into marriage. In rural areas, marriage is often viewed as a safer and more acceptable option for girls than pursuing higher education, especially when job opportunities are uncertain.

Figure-1 Mind Mapping of Implementation Challenges



Source: Author's design

9. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

1. The government should focus on keeping students in school rather than just enrolling them at the secondary level. While early enrollment is fairly strong, the significant drop in the net enrollment rate to 48.6% at the secondary level and 37.6% at

higher secondary indicates that retention is the real issue. Policies should prioritise conditional cash transfers, targeted scholarships for adolescent girls, safe transportation, and the creation of more nearby secondary schools, especially in rural and disadvantaged areas. From an economic perspective, reducing dropout rates at



this level offers the best future earnings and helps delay marriage and increase workforce participation.

2. Address community and cultural barriers through local strategies.

The 13.4% gender gap in adult literacy shows that family background continues to affect girls' educational progress. This points to the need for community involvement, parental awareness programs, and women's literacy initiatives, especially in poorly performing states. Enhancing the visibility of female role models, creating local mentoring systems, and launching campaigns to change social norms can shift views on early marriage and gender roles, leading to better long-term educational outcomes.

3. Increase system efficiency by fixing age-grade gaps and strengthening transitions.

The difference between the higher gross enrollment ratio (78%) and the lower net enrollment rate (48.6%) at the secondary level reflects late entry, grade repetition, and disrupted schooling. Policies should focus on preparing children for early education, providing remedial learning, offering flexible school options, and tracking student progress to ensure they finish grades on time. Improving internal efficiency will save public resources and ensure that investments in education yield productive outcomes.

Evidence shows that policies have improved access but have struggled with ensuring continuity and completion. Structural issues like early marriage, financial difficulties, and inadequate infrastructure contribute to dropout rates. To address these, the government has set up scholarship programs and conditional cash transfers to encourage families to keep girls in school. Initiatives from the Ministry of Women and Child Development offer nutritional support and sanitary facilities to address obstacles that particularly affect girls' attendance and completion rates. For instance, Andhra Pradesh is implementing a Mid-Day Meal Scheme in junior colleges that provides meals for students in grades 11 and 12. They also reimburse all family members' fees, which encourages parents to support their daughters' higher education.

Recent policies focus on inclusivity, catering to girls with disabilities and those in tribal communities. Special initiatives under programs such as the Accessible India Campaign and Van Dhan Vikas Yojana provide customised educational resources and skill-building opportunities to ensure that all girls have equal access to education, in line with the goal of leaving no one behind.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Strengthen secondary education retention by introducing targeted scholarships, transport facilities, and conditional cash transfers for girls at secondary and higher secondary levels.
- Bridge the digital gender divide by expanding digital infrastructure and offering subsidised devices and digital literacy programs for girls.
- Promote gender-sensitive infrastructure by ensuring sanitation, safety, and transport options are available in schools.

- Enhance community involvement through awareness campaigns that address cultural barriers and emphasise the importance of girls' education.

- Improve policy monitoring and evaluation by establishing real-time data systems and outcomes-based evaluation practices.

- Adopt intersectional policy design to create programs for tribal, rural, and marginalised communities.

- Link education with economic opportunities by connecting education to skill development and job pathways.

10. CONCLUSION

India has made notable strides in promoting women's educational empowerment through policies aligned with SDG-5, particularly by increasing access at the foundational level. However, there is still a gap between access and genuine empowerment, as evidenced by issues related to retention, transitions, and meaningful outcomes. Cultural norms, financial barriers, digital inequality, and institutional challenges continue to impede women's full potential. To bridge this gap, there needs to be a shift from expanding access to ensuring continuity, quality, and inclusivity in education. As India works towards the 2030 SDG targets, the emphasis must be on transforming educational opportunities into real empowerment, enabling women to take charge of their futures.

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