

## **Sustainability of women in post-Independence India: Strategies, Challenges, and Achievements**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper explores the journey of Indian women toward achieving sustainability after independence in 1947. It examines how women have contributed to and benefited from developments in economic empowerment, education, political participation, and environmental conservation. Drawing on case studies such as the Self-Help Group (SHG) movement, the Chipko movement, and legal reforms, the paper highlights the strategies Indian women have adopted to overcome challenges and attain sustainable livelihoods. It concludes with policy recommendations aimed at fostering inclusive and gender-equitable sustainable development in India. The paper also tries to answer the questions like: How have Indian women contributed to sustainable development since independence? What mechanisms and movements have they employed to empower themselves? What structural barriers continue to hinder sustainability for women?

**Keywords:** SHG SEWA DWCRA legislature sustainability education microfinance entrepreneurship

### **1. Introduction**

India's independence in 1947 marked a new chapter for the nation, with aspirations for inclusive growth, social justice, and gender equality. However, women, particularly in rural and marginalized communities, continued to face structural inequalities. In the decades following independence, women in India have increasingly engaged in sustainability efforts — from participating in local governance to leading environmental and economic initiatives.

- How have Indian women contributed to sustainable development since independence?
- What mechanisms and movements have they employed to empower themselves?
- What structural barriers continue to hinder sustainability for women?

In general, Sustainability is ability to maintain or support a process over time. Sustainability is often broken into three core concepts: economic, environmental, and social. Many businesses and governments have committed to sustainable goals, such as reducing their environmental footprints and conserving resources. Sustainability in India encompasses environmental protection, economic self-reliance, and social equity. For women, this includes access to education, health, livelihoods, and political participation.

India's sustainability goals, aligned with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), aim at achieving a balance between economic growth, social progress, and environmental protection by 2030. These goals encompass 17 key areas, including poverty eradication, hunger reduction, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, industry, innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, life below water, life on land, peace, justice, and strong institutions, and partnerships for the goals.

India is actively working towards these goals through various policies, programs, and initiatives, including flagship programs like the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission), the National Food Security Act, and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The country also participates in international collaborations like the International Solar Alliance to achieve its sustainability targets

While legal reforms aimed to ensure equality, traditional patriarchal structures, lack of access to resources, and cultural norms presented significant hurdles for women seeking sustainability. Women face unique and significant challenges in sustainability efforts, often stemming from existing gender inequalities and social norms. These challenges include limited access to resources, education, and leadership opportunities, as well as increased vulnerability to the impacts of environmental degradation. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach that tackles gender bias, promotes equal access, and empowers women to participate fully in sustainable development.

## **2. Specific challenges:**

- Limited access to resources: Women often have less access to land, finance, technology, and information, which are crucial for sustainable practices.
- Gender bias and stereotypes: Traditional gender roles and expectations can limit women's participation in certain fields, especially in male-dominated areas like sustainable technology or renewable energy.
- Underrepresentation in leadership and decision-making: Women are often excluded from leadership positions in environmental governance and policy-making, hindering their ability to shape sustainable solutions.
- Work-life balance and caregiving responsibilities: Balancing work with household and caregiving duties can be particularly challenging for women, impacting their ability to engage in sustainable initiatives.
- Vulnerability to environmental impacts: Women are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation, such as droughts and floods, due to their dependence on natural resources for livelihoods.
- Social and cultural norms: Traditional norms can restrict women's mobility, access to education, and participation in certain activities, hindering their ability to engage in sustainable practices.
- Lack of access to education and training: Limited access to education and training in areas relevant to sustainability can hinder women's ability to participate effectively in these fields.

## **3. Addressing these challenges requires:**

- Promoting gender equality: Implementing policies and programs that address gender inequality and discrimination in all aspects of sustainability.
- Increasing access to resources: Ensuring women have equal access to land, finance, technology, and information needed for sustainable practices.
- Empowering women in leadership: Promoting women's representation in leadership positions and decision-making roles related to sustainability.
- Addressing work-life balance: Providing support for women to balance work and caregiving responsibilities, such as flexible work arrangements and affordable childcare.

- Raising awareness and challenging harmful norms: Educating communities about the importance of gender equality and challenging harmful social norms that restrict women's participation in sustainability.
- Investing in women's education and training: Providing access to education and training opportunities in areas related to sustainability.
- Building supportive networks: Creating platforms for women to connect, share experiences, and support each other in their sustainability efforts.

The 2023 edition of [“Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The gender snapshot 2023”](#) tracks gender equality across the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and highlights 11 key roadblocks.

**3.1. Lack of women in leadership:** With just 27 per cent of parliamentary seats, 36 per cent of local government seats, and 28 per cent of management positions held by women, there is a lack of diverse perspectives in decision-making processes, hindering comprehensive policy formulation.

**3.2. Poverty and lack of economic opportunities:** More than 340 million women and girls are projected to live in extreme poverty by 2030. This represents a staggering 8 per cent of the global female population surviving on less than USD 2.15 a day. Social protections, access to decent work, and other support systems are urgently needed to provide a path out of poverty.

**3.3. Workplace discrimination and inequalities:** Only 61 per cent of prime working-age women participate in the labour force, compared to 91 per cent of prime working-age men. This affects both economic growth and societal progress. In 2019, for each dollar men earned in labour income, women earned only 51 cents.

**3.4. An imbalance in unpaid care work:** On the current trajectory, the gap between the time spent by women and men on unpaid care will narrow slightly, but by 2050, women globally will still be spending 9.5 per cent more time (2.3 more hours per day) on unpaid care work than men. This persistent gap limits women's participation in education, employment, and other opportunities.

**3.5. Social norms and cultural practices:** Harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation persist. Globally, one in five young women is married before age 18. The prevalence of child marriage highlights the need for attitudinal shifts and the promotion of legal frameworks that safeguard women and girls' rights.

**3.6. Inadequate access to education and health care:** An estimated 110 million girls and young women may remain out of school by 2030. Stalled progress in reducing maternal mortality and expanding educational opportunities call for targeted interventions to meet the 2030 goals.

**3.7. Food insecurity:** Nearly 24 per cent of women and girls are expected to experience moderate to severe food insecurity by 2030. Empowering women in food and agricultural systems by enhancing access to land and resources is vital for ensuring food security and economic growth.

**3.8. Violence against women and girls:** Each year, 245 million women and girls experience physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner. Older women also face higher rates of poverty and violence than older men.

**3.9. Inadequate funding for gender equality initiatives:** Only 4 per cent of total bilateral aid is allocated to gender equality and women's empowerment. The additional investment needed for achieving gender equality by 2030 is estimated at USD 360 billion per year.

**3.10.** Legal barriers and poorly enforced legislation: At least 28 countries do not have laws granting women equal rights to enter marriage and initiate divorce, and 67 countries lack laws prohibiting direct and indirect discrimination against women. Where legislation does exist to promote gender equality, effective implementation remains a challenge.

**3.11.** Lack of access to clean energy and sanitation: An estimated 341 million women and girls are projected to lack electricity by 2030. Universal access could significantly reduce poverty and improve women's health.

With just seven years remaining to achieve the 2030 targets, concerted efforts and funding are more necessary than ever. Each step forward, no matter how incremental, brings us closer to a future where gender equality is not just a goal, but a reality.

#### **4. Strategies Adopted by Indian Women**

Sustainability through Economic Empowerment - Self-Help Groups (SHGs)

- The SHG movement, especially since the 1990s, empowered millions of rural women by providing microloans, financial training, and collective bargaining power.
- Organizations like SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) helped women in informal sectors achieve financial independence.
- According to a 2024 report, women now own 20.5% of India's micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), with a growing number of entrepreneurs ([BW Businessworld](#)). This surge signals a powerful shift in the rural economy with microfinance and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) creating pathways for women to lead sustainable businesses and uplift their communities.
- Microfinance supports rural women by providing small loans and financial services to low-income women. Self-Help Groups (SHGs), typically formed by women in rural India, are grassroots collectives that save together and access microcredit to build their economic resilience and drive change.
- Together, microfinance through SHGs in India has transformed the rural entrepreneurial landscape. These tools empower women with money, build confidence, skills, and fosters a sense of women-driven rural entrepreneurship.

Financial assistance alone is not enough. Entrepreneurial growth in rural areas needs consistent capacity-building support for women entrepreneurs that includes:

- Hands-on technical training: Production skills, quality control, and supply chain management.
- Business acumen: Pricing, branding, and customer relationships.
- Market access: Exposure visits, trade fairs, and digital promotion essentials for expansion.
- Policy awareness: Navigating government schemes and registering enterprises.

Microfinance and SHGs are not merely financial tools—they're instruments of social change. When women take charge of a business, it transforms not just their income, but their status, confidence, and role in society.

Sustainability through Education and Skill Development

- Post-independence education policies like the National Policy on Education (1986) emphasized girls' education.
- post-independence education policies in India, including the National Policy on Education (NEP) 2020, have consistently emphasized the importance of girls'

education. These policies aim at ensuring equal access, retention, and opportunities for girls in education, addressing historical disparities and promoting their empowerment.

- National Policy on Education (NEP) 2020:
- This policy explicitly focuses on gender-inclusive education, aiming to create safe and supportive learning environments for girls. It also highlights the crucial role of female teachers and promotes their professional development to serve as role models. The policy encourages the recruitment of female teachers in rural and remote areas, where gender gaps in education are often more pronounced.
- Post-independence India has recognized that historical and social factors have hindered girls' access to education. Policies like NEP 2020 aim at addressing these disparities by ensuring equal access and retention of girls in schools.
- NEP 2020 advocates for a curriculum that goes beyond traditional rote learning and focuses on developing practical skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities including girls.
- The policy emphasizes the universalization of education, ensuring that all children, including girls, have access to education at all levels, from early childhood care to secondary education.
- NEP 2020 encourages the integration of digital tools and online learning platforms into mainstream education, potentially offering greater flexibility and access to education for girls.
- Beyond NEP 2020, various other initiatives have been implemented to promote girls' education, such as the provision of scholarships, adult education programs, and the construction of girls' hostels to reduce dropouts.

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- government programs like Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP) and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) have played a significant role in bridging gender gaps in education in India. These initiatives have focused on improving girls' access to education, promoting their well-being, and challenging social norms that hinder their educational progress.
- This scheme aims to address the declining child sex ratio and promote girls' education and empowerment. It has been successful in raising awareness about the importance of educating girls, increasing enrollment rates, and reducing early marriage, [according to Champions of Change](#).
- Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV):
- These residential schools cater to girls from marginalized communities, providing them with a safe and supportive environment to pursue their education. KGBVs are particularly crucial in addressing the educational needs of girls from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Both BBBP and KGBV have contributed to increased enrollment rates, particularly in states with traditionally lower female literacy rates. The initiatives have also helped shift societal attitudes towards girls' education and empowerment.

Sustainability through Political Participation

- The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992) mandated 33% reservation for women in local governance (Panchayati Raj Institutions).

- The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act mandates a 33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India. This means that one-third of the seats in all elected positions within the local governing bodies of villages, intermediate, and district levels are reserved for women. This provision, enacted in 1992, aims to empower women by ensuring their participation and representation in local governance.
- The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 introduced the Panchayati Raj system and included the mandatory reservation of one-third of the seats for women in all tiers of the Panchayati Raj Institutions.
- Purpose of Reservation: The primary goal of this reservation is to enhance women's participation in political processes and decision-making at the grassroots level. This reservation applies to all elected positions, including those of chairpersons, at the village, intermediate, and district levels of the Panchayati Raj system. While the initial provision was for 33%, many states have increased the reservation for women to 50% in their respective Panchayati Raj Acts. The reservation has led to a significant increase in the number of women elected to local bodies, though challenges remain regarding the effective exercise of their power and influence. This enabled women to influence local decision-making, especially in rural development, water management, and education.

#### Sustainability through Environmental Leadership

- The Chipko Movement (1970s), led by rural women in Uttarakhand, pioneered grassroots environmental activism in India.
- Women's involvement in water harvesting, organic farming, and forest conservation has been vital in many parts of India, especially in ecologically sensitive zones.

#### Self-Help Groups in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh are the best examples of sustainability of women.

- SHGs under programs like DWCRA and National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) provided credit and savings mechanisms to rural women.
- These women-led groups have improved family incomes, school enrollment for girls, and community health practices. The DWCRA (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas) program in India has had a significant and positive impact on the sustainability of women's lives, particularly in rural areas. It has fostered economic empowerment, improved social equity, and enhanced overall well-being.
- DWCRA, through its focus on Self-Help Groups (SHGs), has provided women with access to credit, training, and resources to start and manage their own businesses. This has led to increased income generation for women, boosting household incomes and overall community wealth.
- The program has encouraged women to engage in various economic activities, such as agriculture, handicrafts, and small-scale businesses, leading to greater economic independence and self-reliance.
- DWCRA has empowered women to participate more actively in decision-making processes within their families and communities.
- By improving their economic standing and social participation, DWCRA has contributed to an enhanced social status for women in their communities.
- The program has also led to greater awareness among women about their rights, health, and social issues, enabling them to advocate for themselves and their communities.

- DWCRA's emphasis on community involvement in the planning and implementation of development programs has ensured that the benefits are sustainable even after external assistance is withdrawn.
- The economic and social empowerment of women through DWCRA has resulted in long-term positive changes in their lives and communities.
- By fostering self-reliance and economic independence, DWCRA has reduced women's dependency on external aid and traditional support systems.
- DWCRA groups have been involved in initiatives related to health and nutrition, particularly for pregnant women and newborns.
- The program has also contributed to increased educational attainment for girls, opening up new opportunities for their personal and professional growth.

## 5. Key Challenges

### Patriarchal Norms

- Social expectations often restrict women's mobility and agency.
- Early marriage, dowry practices, and son preference continue to affect women's autonomy and education.

### Limited Access to Land and Resources

- Despite legal rights, women own less than 15% of agricultural land in India.
- Women farmers, who comprise nearly 33% of India's agricultural labor force, often lack access to credit and extension services.

### Violence and Safety Concerns

- Gender-based violence, both domestic and public, deters women from accessing education and employment opportunities.
- Lack of infrastructure (e.g., sanitation, transportation) especially affects rural women's mobility.

### Policy Implementation Gaps

- While laws and schemes exist, enforcement and awareness remain inconsistent.
- Corruption and lack of gender-sensitive governance structures often dilute program impact.

### Achievements and Progress

- Literacy and Education: Female literacy increased from 8.9% in 1951 to over 70% in 2021.
- Economic Participation: Although challenges remain, female-led enterprises and SHGs have grown, particularly in rural areas.
- Health and Fertility: Improved access to maternal health services led to declines in maternal mortality and fertility rates.
- Political Representation: Over 1.4 million women now serve in Panchayati Raj Institutions across India.

## 6. Conclusion

Women in India have made significant strides toward sustainability since independence, often through community-based action and grassroots leadership. Despite persistent challenges, their role in economic development, environmental conservation, and democratic participation continues to grow. A gender-equitable approach to policy-making, backed by robust implementation, is essential for building a truly sustainable and inclusive India. Still the govt should ensure women have legal and enforceable rights to own and inherit land., scale up

financial and technical support to SHGs and microenterprises, invest in safety, infrastructure, and incentives to keep girls in school through secondary levels, strengthen mechanisms to address violence against women and ensure legal protections are implemented, include women's voices in environmental governance and climate adaptation programs.

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