



Why is achieving gender equality so elusive¹?

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In November 2024, two crucial gender report cards were released: Equal Measure released the 2024 SDG Gender Index³, and Feminist Policy Collective (FPC) 2024 released the India Gender Report⁴. Both these reports portray a rather sobering, if not gloomy, picture of gender equality status globally as well as in India. With less than six years remaining until 2030, the 2024 SDG Gender Index by Equal Measures shows that no country is on track to achieve gender equality by 2030. The report highlights significant disparities for women and girls who encounter layered discrimination and disadvantage based on their race or ethnicity, wealth, geographic location, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, and other factors. India Gender Report reinforces much of what is revealed in the equal measure report and shows that the gaps perhaps may be much more severe. Even among the G20 countries, India's performance has been rather dismal. Its female LFPR among the G20 nations has the lowest average: 30 per cent between 2001 and 2007, 28 during

2008-2014, and a mere 23 per cent during 2015-2021. The recent rise by about five percentage points is due primarily to an increase in unpaid family workers. Also, India reports the highest gender gap in employment rates at 57 percentage points. The data on physical and sexual violence that women experience present yet another challenge that the efforts to promote gender equality need to deal with and address. A comparison between NFHS-5, NFHS-4 and NFHS-3 about intimate partner violence faced by women shows that over the past two decades, the rates of reported physical and sexual violence within domestic spaces have registered a slight increase from 24% in 2005-06 to 27% in 2019-21⁵. More disturbingly, of those who reported experiencing violence, only 14% sought some help!

One can think of numerous reasons, and many writings elucidate why achieving gender equality has been such an uphill task despite all global and national conventions,

¹ This is an updated version of the paper. "Khurana, N and Verma R., "SDG-5: Addressing gaps and accelerating progress towards a feminist, intersectional, and transformative vision for change" in Saroj Pachauri and Ravi K Verma (editors) "Transforming Unequal Gender Relations in India and Beyond". Springer 2023

² International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)

³ EM2030. A gender equal future in crisis? Findings from the 2024 SDG Gender Index (Seattle: Equal Measures 2030, 2024).

⁴ India Gender Report (2024); Feminist Policy Collective <https://www.feministpolicyindia.org/>

⁵ NFHS-3 (2005-06), NFHS -4 (2015-16), NFHS-5 (2019-21): National Family Health Survey Reports, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai.

consensus, goals, and targets. In this article, I summarise a few prominent feminist concerns and critiques of what has been done so far to achieve gender equality, especially within the framework of sustainable development goals and offer my reflections on what needs to be done to promote gender equality.

At the outset, one must admit that gender has never acquired such a central space within development discourses as it has now, especially after setting the sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Reading the history of feminist movements leading up to various world conventions, however, shows that the journey has not been easy or without challenges. Let us first briefly look at the significant milestones that have helped set the gender equality agenda before we discuss the concerns and way forward.

Road to SDGs:

The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (FCWC) in Beijing mark crucial milestones for world-wide cooperation, collaboration and commitment to women's rights and gender equality. Although FCWC was preceded by other World Conferences on Women (Mexico City, 1975; Copenhagen, 1980; and Nairobi, 1985), the 1995 Beijing conference and its outcome document – the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) catalysed a broad, progressive consensus among governments, donors, and civil society for action on twelve critical areas of concern linked to gender – including education, health, violence, etc. (UN Women, 2015).

The FWCW and BPfA documents specifically advanced three key policy areas for women: domestic violence, women's peace and security, and electoral quotas for female leadership (Sandler and Goetz, 2020). These documents emphasised the need for disaggregated gender data by caste, class, age and socio-economic status, time-bound targets, and measurable goals. Significantly, even then, some issues, such as abortion rights, were excluded. Nevertheless, the otherwise comprehensive agenda of the FWCW and BPfA has significantly influenced gender equality discourse over the past three decades or so.

In 2000, coinciding with the BPfA's first five-year review, the UN introduced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to reduce poverty and human suffering by 2015. To the surprise of many, MDGs overshadowed the BPfA's broader vision and offered a narrower framework for addressing gender inequality, termed the “lowest common denominator” (Razavi, 2016). While the MDG framework included a goal for gender equality (MDG 3), it limited its focus to eliminating gender inequality in primary and secondary education by 2005, and all education levels by 2015 (United Nations, n.d.-a). By 2015, however, the MDG3 target was only achieved at the primary school level, and the underlying premise that the education of girls would improve outcomes in employment and political participation remained unfulfilled. The outright failure of MDGs was a clear testimony of its lack of deeper analysis and grasp of the complex nature of human development and its attempts to impose a few simplistic indicators.

In addition to the narrowed scope and vision of the MDG framework, the goals were also heavily criticized for the top-down and non-participatory process through which they were developed – a stark contrast from the extensive civil society engagement that enriched the development of the Beijing framework at the FWCW, and the various other UN development-focused conferences of the 1990s. Drawn from the International Development Targets proposed by the OECD-DAC in 1996, the MDGs were drafted in a closed-door process at the UN by a small group of technocrats led by Jeffrey Sachs (Razavi, 2016; Fukuda-Parr, 2016). Thus, the MDG development process was not only removed from the broader development discourses and debates at the time, but it also reflected the disproportionate influence of the donor countries and the increasing power of macro-economic models at the highest levels of development planning (Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Razavi, 2016; Sandler & Goetz, 2020; Azcona & Bhatt, 2020).

In 2015, following the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets. Coupled with the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the SDGs guide development through 2030, emphasising “people, planet, and prosperity.” Unlike the MDGs' reductionist approach, the SDGs address socioeconomic, environmental, and political issues, prioritising human rights and a commitment to “leave no one behind.” Among the 17 goals, SDGs include a comprehensive goal on gender equality (Goal

5: “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”). It comprises nine targets addressing crucial issues like violence against women, economic empowerment, sexual and reproductive health, and political participation. These targets focus on ending gender-based discrimination, ensuring women’s access to resources, and reforming laws to support empowerment and equality. In addition to having a stand-alone goal, the 2030 Agenda aims to mainstream gender across various goals, such as achieving gender parity in education (SDG 4), addressing the specific vulnerabilities of women and girls in sanitation (SDG 6), and ensuring decent work for women, including migrant workers (SDG 8). It acknowledges that sustainable development is unattainable if half of humanity is denied rights and opportunities and stresses the importance of integrating a gender perspective throughout the 2030 Agenda’s implementation. Of the 232 indicators chosen to monitor the 17 goals, 23% (53) are gender-focused and gender-specific.

How convincing is the SDG framework to challenge structural inequalities? Feminist concerns

Agenda 2030 and SDG 5 improve upon the MDGs. Still, their ability to tackle or challenge the underlying structures that uphold the status quo concerning gender equity and social justice has been seriously questioned. Analyses show Agenda 2030 does not confront systemic gender inequality and power dynamics at household, state, and international levels, continuing gender disparities and intersectional discrimination. A closer examination of the history of making SDGs clearly shows that different actors have affected the agenda, obscuring gender and

social justice achievements. I list below some of the critical concerns below:

1. One of the first feminist critiques is that the SDGs do not challenge the neo-liberal power structures and paradigms but reinforce them. The SDG's fundamental assumption that "grow first, redistribute later" simplistically assumes that economic growth automatically translates into well-being and equality. However, the belief in a direct link between economic growth and gender equality is problematic. For example, Feminist Collective's India Gender Report shows that while higher education's expansion and inclusive nature has widened opportunities for women from marginalised communities, it is yet to reflect in the labour market. Social hierarchies are still important determinants in the entry to many jobs and sectors in the private sector. Agenda 2030 promotes women's economic empowerment and values their work but overlooks how economic power structures relate to patriarchal norms and practices, thus denying opportunities to those who need them.

Tracking women's lives from 2004 to 2024 with data from the India Human Development Survey (IHDS), Sonalde Desai documented changes in Indian women's lives and highlighted the aspirational transformation young women in the 2020s experience compared to their counterparts from the early 2000s. However, according to the IHD survey for over two decades, the one area where a transformation has not even begun relates

to economic opportunities. The IHDS shows that the proportion of 20-29-year-old women in wage labour was 18 per cent in 2012, falling to 14 per cent in 2022. In India, between 2011-12 and 2017-18, there was a steep drop in the labour force participation rate (LFPR) among rural women from 25.3 per cent to 18.2 percent, and that among urban women changed very little from 15.9 percent to 15.5 percent. The rates started increasing to 30.5 percent for rural women and 22.2 percent for urban women in 2022-23. Despite this, the level is still lower than the global and regional averages (India Gender Report, 2024).

Several factors contribute to the decline in women's labour force participation, including the mechanization of agriculture, which has marginalised rural women from farming jobs, and migration due to marriage, which results in job loss. A significant obstacle is the need for more consistent and reliable job opportunities for women. This issue highlights the more substantial problem of informal labour markets dominated by male breadwinners, where women participate in the workforce primarily when job options coincide with their reproductive duties. Women predominantly occupy lower-paying, lower-quality, and informal sector jobs, facing heightened risks of vulnerable employment. According to Desai, *"the new economic orthodoxy tells us that women's low levels of employment are because of restrictive social norms that look down on families where women work"*.

2. Another significant concern that has been raised is how SDG framework and national governments have relied heavily upon the private sector to achieve development goals, including gender equality. Ongoing concerns exist that this sector's unregulated, profit-driven nature often disrupts human rights, gender equality, and the environment. Agenda 2030 does not address these issues. Instead of aligning with sustainable development goals, the private sector can sometimes profit from inequality, posing challenges to the commitment to "people, planet, and prosperity". The irony is that neither the SDG framework nor the governments

have prepared any accountability mechanism or protocols for the private sector. Agenda 2030, recognises the private sector as a principal 'development actor' and 'engine of growth.' The UN Secretary-General has openly acknowledged that many countries would struggle to achieve the SDG targets without financial support from the private sector. Critics have expressed concerns about the growing role of the private sector in light of its insufficient accountability to marginalised groups, including women and children from poor and marginalised communities.

Table 1 Comparison between NFHS-5, NFHS-4 and NFHS-3 in relation to intimate partner violence faced by women

Violence faced by ever-married women of reproductive age (15–49 years)	NFHS -5 (2019-2021)		NFHS-4 (2015–16)		NFHS-3 (2005–06)	
	Lifetime prevalence	Previous 12 months	Lifetime prevalence	Previous 12 months	Lifetime prevalence	Previous 12 months
Prevalence of physical or sexual violence	32%	27%	31%	24%	37%	24%
Of above, reported some injury as a consequence of intimate partner violence	24.8%	-	25%	25%	38%	42%
Cuts, bruises or aches	-	-	21%	22%	36%	40%
Eye injuries, sprains, dislocations or burns	-	-	8%	9%	9%	10%
Deep wounds, broken bones, broken teeth	-	-	5%	6%	7%	8%
Severe burns	-	-	3%	4%	2%	2.1%
Sought some form of help	-	14%	14%	14%	24%	24%
Of above, sought help from police	-	6%	3%	3%	2%	2%
Of above, sought help from doctor	-	2%	1%	1%	0.04%	0.04%

Source: NFHS-3 (2005–06) and NFHS-4 (2015–16), NFHS (2019-2021): National Family Health Survey 3 & 4, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai. Compiled by Dr. Padma Bhate-Deosthali

3. Feminists and women's groups stress the need for gender-specific indicators and timely, reliable information. In this context, there is a pressing need for timely and comprehensive data regarding violence against women and girls.

Table 1 presents domestic violence data across three rounds of NFHS. The reported experience of physical or sexual violence seems to have increased over the past two decades, as is evidenced from the above data. This is a serious concern, given that India has witnessed sharp economic growth over the past two decades. What is most concerning is that the majority of women who experience violence don't report it to anyone. In the above table, for example, only 14% of women who experienced violence sought support from someone, mostly family. The proportion seeking help from police and doctors was as low as 3 and 2 per cent, respectively, during the latest NFHS-5 survey. An example of how serious the data gap on the issue of both prevalence and incidence of violence against women and girls is, can be seen by closely examining NFHS and NCRB data. Both data sets also show a severe reluctance on the part of the women to report violence to anyone. The number of domestic violence cases registered at NCRB, however, is only 0.11 million across different reporting periods!

It is important to note that NFHS does not provide disaggregated data on violence against women with disabilities despite their increased vulnerability. The gaps in data on violence call for national-level specialised

surveys to provide estimates of the violence faced by women with disabilities and by people with non-binary identities. Capturing data on various inequalities while including marginalised and at-risk groups remains challenging. The lack of evidence about the unique vulnerabilities of marginalised people, including the violence they face, obstructs a comprehensive understanding of exclusion, which is crucial for developing targeted policies that priorities those furthest behind and ensure they benefit from progress SDGs.

4. Although there is a commitment to achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls, SDG 5 and its associated targets and indicators are expressed in binary, cisnormative terms. This raises questions about whether trans women and girls are included, highlighting a broader neglect of the needs of those marginalized due to their gender identity and expression, as well as other gender-diverse or marginalized groups. Furthermore, there is growing recognition that significant development issues like poverty, equity, and hunger are not neutral regarding gender or age, with adolescent girls experiencing increased gender-related challenges during adolescence. The Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research program's analysis emphasizes the neglect of adolescents and their specific needs and vulnerabilities within Agenda 2030. This involves critical matters such as the sexual and reproductive health (SRH) needs of unmarried, sexually active adolescents, the conditions faced by refugee adolescent girls (and boys), and access to education and

⁶ Dr Padma Deosthali provided data comparing NCRB and NFHS on reported violence and help-seeking in a personal communication.

resources for disabled individuals' adolescents.

The Way Forward

Gender inequality is a pervasive issue globally and within India. Most efforts and policy initiatives trying to bring gender equality are framed within the women's empowerment framework almost at the exclusion of men and boys and rely heavily on achieving numerical targets in girls' and women's education, their health, leadership and so on without challenging the patriarchal roots and gender norms that support and sustain inequalities on the axes of caste, class, gender, abilities and innumerable other forms of physical, social, contextual and economic hierarchies. There is an urgent need to enhance strategies for women's empowerment and promote gender equality through transformative policies, programming and evidence-building. Central to this effort should be examining each SDG and development indicator through its potential to transform gender relations in varying contexts. The questions must be asked if achieving a specific outcome truly helps transform the power dynamics between and amongst individuals and between individuals on one hand and families, communities, states, and markets on the other. To achieve the goal of a transformative society with equality as its ultimate goal, there are some non-negotiables as briefly outlined below:

Create disaggregated, intersectional, and accessible data.

Improving data and analysis is essential for evidence-based policy and accountability. Agenda 2030 offers a framework to monitor the 17 SDGs, but the COVID-19 pandemic

highlighted the challenges of lacking sex-disaggregated data to understand gender impacts and address vulnerabilities of women and girls. Analysis of intersectional hierarchies and disadvantages is lacking in current data structures. It is often more challenging to find data disaggregated by axes of identity such as caste, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation than by gender or sex. The Agenda 2030, committed to "leave no one behind," offers a framework to address intersecting inequalities. It broadens the discussion beyond gender differences, acknowledging that categories like 'women' are not homogeneous and experience power diversely. Various identity axes create unique experiences of privilege and oppression, influenced by deep-rooted, historical hierarchies that result in exclusion. Stuart and Woodroffe (2016) suggest three policy responses for addressing these inequalities, starting with identifying marginalized groups, collecting data on their barriers, and involving them in the process.

Collecting data on intersecting marginalizations is challenging but vital, as disaggregated data empowers marginalized groups. Equal Measures highlights that lack of data often ties to political power (EM2030, 2022). The choice of what goes uncounted reflects power dynamics (Cobham, 2019). Consequently, the invisible face additional barriers in proving their marginalization and advocating for policy needs (EM2030, 2022). Expanding methodologies and tools, like household surveys, over-sampling, community-based data, and revising statistics systems, can help address gaps in gender and intersecting inequalities (Stuart and Woodroffe, 2016). Strengthening data systems

and supporting researchers, practitioners, and policymakers will build evidence for the most marginalised and ensure targeted policies fulfil commitments to leave no one behind.

Promote women in leadership.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the absence of women within leadership in the health sector - with a review of 200 global health organizations finding that 70% of CEOs and health board chairs are men (Global Health 50/50, 2020), while globally, 70% of frontline health workers are women (WHO, 2021). This finding is particularly stark at a time when the importance of women in leadership is dominating the global discourse, with several researchers, activists, and advocates highlighting that women-led countries have performed better at fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, women form the backbone of 'essential workers' at the frontlines of providing healthcare and social care during the crisis, and are among the hardest hit by the health and socioeconomic fallouts of the pandemic (Khurana, Chadha, & Acharya, 2020).

The problem extends beyond the health sector. In addition to promoting access to resources and power, women's empowerment requires the ability and agency for women to access opportunities without a constant struggle against systematic, structural barriers, and for women to have the space for decision-making on priority areas determined by them. Women's exclusion from policy and programming spaces limits their participation in discourses and dialogues that impact them - particularly in the face of powerful, patriarchal institutions and paradigms. Women's leadership must be

reconceptualized beyond giving women a "seat at the table", particularly within the elite and formal spaces of governmental and managerial positions. In addition to promoting women's leadership in individual positions of power, it is thus also key to promote and support women's collective action as a tool for transformational change (Stuart and Woodroffe, 2016).

Build transformative strategies and approaches that engage with men and boys.

Given the challenges above, how can transformative programs be built? What are the best approaches? Geeta Rao Gupta initially proposed a gender integration spectrum from gender-neutral to gender-transformative approaches, critically examining gender-related norms, including masculinities. Over the past two decades, there have been consistent efforts mainly within the health sector and civil society organizations to develop and validate gender-transformative programs for men, boys, women, and girls. These interventions have produced valuable insights. Gender transformative approaches intentionally challenge inequitable power relations, reflect on men's realities, and create safe spaces for reflection and action among all genders. In contrast, gender neutral approaches maintain existing power dynamics, tackle symptoms like violence and child marriage, and treat gender as primarily a women's issue. They engage men to improve outcomes for women but often overlook men's need for transformation. Gender synchronization, a key transformative strategy, addresses the needs of both men and women through various participatory methods, including single- and mixed-gender groups to reshape gender norms.

An eco-system-based gender transformative program operates at various levels. On an individual level, it creates an open-minded foundation for discussions about power and privilege. A key characteristic of this program is its appreciation for change makers without creating heroes; discussions focus on the ongoing change process and self-critical thinking. While addressing normative expectations, accountability for male privilege is also emphasised.

At the institutional level, multi-tier engagement fosters system ownership and sustains gender mainstreaming, capacity building, and pedagogical shifts. Structured, well-designed and intentional gender transformative programs have shown positive outcomes on some of key parameters of boys and men's engagement on gender equality issues. For example, school-based programs have shown positive results in terms of improved attitude of boys, girls and teachers towards gender norms and violence; increased peer interaction and communication; improved communication with teachers; increased reporting of violence perpetrated by peers and teachers; improved bystander intervention; and improved school environment. Stories of change that emerged from Parivartan, ICRW's sports-based gender transformative program implemented in Mumbai between 2008-12, highlighted the nuances and complexities of the ways in which men experience and participate in the change process. In one documented story of change⁷,

a former Parivartan coach reflects on how his own attitudes and behaviors began to shift through participation in program trainings, and the ways in which these changes were perceived by his peers and other men – highlighting the importance of group-based approaches that promote safe spaces for vulnerability and reflecting among men. As his female partner suggests, there need to be more and consistent engagement opportunities and spaces for men to think, reflect and learn about gender and equality. Another story of change⁸ documents the journey of a Parivartan program participant, who shares about the pressures on men to provide for their families, and challenges the notion of what a 'real man' should be. Although gender norm change is a long-drawn process, transformative interventions can play a key role in destabilizing the foundations and assumptions of patriarchy and encouraging men to collectively reimagine masculinities and gender equality.

Build a feminist, care-oriented economic paradigm

Gender inequality is fundamentally and intrinsically linked to economic paradigms and structures that value growth, profit, and market production and exchange at the expense of social provisioning, care, sustainability and equity. Thus, it is imperative to rethink the organization of the "daily and intergenerational reproduction of people and society" (Kabeer et al, 2021) and the practices and processes that "provide for

⁷ ICRW and ALIGN Platform. *Changing norms of masculinity that uphold male privilege*. Video: *Masculinities in India: Nasir and Hasina*. <https://www.alignplatform.org/resources/changing-norms-masculinity-uphold-male-privilege>

⁸ ICRW and ALIGN Platform. *Changing norms of masculinity that uphold male privilege*. Video: *Masculinities in India: Prashant*. <https://www.alignplatform.org/resources/changing-norms-masculinity-uphold-male-privilege>

the survival and flourishing of life” (Heintz, Staab, & Turquet 2021). It must be recognized that austerity is often a political choice rather than a fiscal necessity (EM2030, 2022), and that such measures hit the most vulnerable and marginalized - including women and girls - the hardest.

A feminist political economy perspective to dismantling and rebuilding the economic paradigm places social reproduction at its center, not only making visible but also valuing the social relations and nonmarket goods and services that are essential to sustaining human beings and the environment (Stevano et al 2021). Economic metrics and systems require reconceptualization and recalibration away from the singular focus on gross domestic product (GDP) and traditionally-defined ‘productive’ activities, towards social reproduction and care shouldered by households and families - particularly women and girls. Social protections and provisions must be extended to all with particular attention to the most marginalized populations who face the greatest barriers in access, bringing an end to the “commodification, privatization, and financialization of social protection” that has dominated economic discourse, policy, and practice for decades (Stevano et al, 2021). Gender-responsive budgets, progressive taxation and strong investment in public services will be necessary to mitigate the inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and fund efforts to fundamentally transform and build a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable economic paradigm.

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