



Sumit Kumar Bharti

## India@47: Women-led Development

Assistant Professor- Department Of Political Science, Kamla Nehru College,  
University Of Delhi, India

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**Abstract:** *India @75 under the helm of an Adivasi women president is built on the hopes, dreams, aspirations, and committed hard work of 1.3 billion citizens, half of them are proud women of the nation. As the nation celebrates the sweet nectar of an "Amrit Mahotsav", let us not forget the original challenges long mentioned in the "Tryst with the Destiny" and presently categorically enumerated as Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030). Addressing the country from the rampant of Red Fort on 76th Independence Day, Prime Minister rightly mentioned that India needs the full and dynamic contribution of women in every single walk of socio-political and economic life to achieve the SDGs and become a developed nation by 2047. This paper tries to categorically analyze and assess the prospective role of women in realizing the SDGs like the alleviation of poverty and hunger, achieving universal health and well-being along with quality education with specific prominence on the long-envisioned goal of achieving "Gender Equality". The paper also comprehends the hurdles faced by women themselves and elucidates their critical role in SDGs.*

**Key Words:** : Women, Women empowerment, SDGs, Poverty, Health, Gender Equality, Development.

"There Is No Chance for The Welfare of The World Unless the Conditions of The Women Is Improved".

-Swami Vivekananda

The above-mentioned statement by one of the most profoundly recognized intellectual modern man on the planet reflects the very premise of the development under the broader socio-political and economic and ecological domain of the welfare state. Women used to be the target group of any developmental goal or policies of any welfare administration set up around the world.

Addressing the G-20 summit session on November 2022 at Bali, the grouping of the 20 most developed and fastest developing countries with 80% of world GDP, the Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi rightly asserted that "The need today is that the benefits of development are universal and all-inclusive. We have to extend the benefits of development to all human beings with compassion and solidarity. Global development is not possible without women's participation. We have to maintain priority on women-led development even in our G-20 agenda."<sup>1</sup>

Since the days of the first Five years plan<sup>2</sup> the development of women has been treated as a subject of 'Welfare' but in the subsequent five-year plans, the policies and methods have changed from 'Welfare' to 'Development' and then to 'Empowerment'. With the dawn of NITI Ayog and decentralization of planning with the motto of "minimum government to maximum governance"<sup>3</sup>, the focus in India's developmental journey has been shifted from "women development to women-led development"<sup>4</sup>. It is in this context that India strives to achieve the 'Millennium development goals'<sup>5</sup> earlier and the realisation of the Sustainable development Goals in the 21st century to achieve the target of becoming a developed nation by 2047.

**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS-** At the Rio De Janeiro (Rio+20 conference- 2012), all the members of the United Nations accepted the agenda titled "Transforming Our World: The Agenda for Sustainable Development"<sup>6</sup>, as a non-binding and voluntary commitment. These are the target of 17 goals, 169 targets with 304 indicators to be achieved by all the members of the United Nations General Assembly from 2015 to 2030 to "mobilize global efforts to end poverty, foster peace, safeguard the rights and dignity of all people, and protect the planet"<sup>7</sup>.



Source: <https://en.unesco.org/sustainabledevelopmentgoals>



As per the official document of the United Nations, these goals are imperative because "The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a global blueprint for dignity, peace, and prosperity for people and the planet, now and in the future"<sup>8</sup>. India too has aligned its developmental goals and policies with the SDGs to foster equitable development with the active involvement and participation of all sections of the society, especially the women because "despite the emergence of India as a major economic player, its poor record of human development reflects the persistence of poverty and inequality"<sup>9</sup>.

**SDGS AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN-** Today when we are now at an inspiring instant in the expedition to the year 2030, by when countries around the world are dedicated to accomplishing the determined sustainable development goals, they set out for themselves in 2015. The role and active participation of 49% of the population becomes the focal point of the analysis of each of the 17 goals.

The agenda, distinct from the MDGs, has a separate Goal of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Additionally, there are "gender equality targets in other Goals and a more consistent call for sex disaggregation of data across many indicators"<sup>10</sup>.

**GOAL 1: END POVERTY IN ALL ITS FORMS EVERYWHERE-** Eradicating extreme poverty for all was a long-cherished goal for every country and society and India remains no exception. Incidences of life-threatening poverty as measured by the World Bank's International poverty lines have declined "from 21.6% in 2011 to 13.4% in 2015"<sup>11</sup>. Aided by strong economic growth, more than 90 million people escaped extreme poverty and improved their living standards during this period. Despite this success, poverty remains a perennial issue in India. In 2015, with the latest estimates, "176 million Indians were living in extreme poverty"<sup>12</sup>.

The NITI Aayog India National Multidimensional Poverty Index: Baseline Report 2021, identifies 25.01% of India's population as multidimensionally poor, significantly lower than the Priority Household beneficiaries under the National Food Security Act<sup>13</sup>. The most notable features of all the poverty estimates are the acute phenomenon of 'the feminisation of poverty'<sup>14</sup>. As per the NSS report of Time Use in India- 2020, 91.8% of unpaid work is done by females.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, women occupy the central stage in the programmes and policies for poverty alleviation as they constitute the major population in poverty. Government initiatives like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) which provides "that at least one-third of the beneficiaries shall be women who have registered and requested work under the programme"<sup>16</sup> and women-led cooperative organizations like KUDUMBASHREE<sup>17</sup> have sustainably help in reducing the overall proportion of the population living in abject poverty, especially the rural women.

**GOAL 2: END HUNGER IN ALL ITS FORMS-** Poverty and hunger always remain synonyms for each other with the latter being the naked manifestation of the former and continuously existing simultaneously. In the 21st Century, Hunger has taken various dimensions and forms of malnutrition, stunting, and anemia.

As per World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index 2022, India ranked 135 among 146 nations but in the Health and Survival subindex, India was ranked 146, which is "lowest among all nations"<sup>18</sup> depicting the prevalence of acute hunger and Anaemia<sup>19</sup> among women. In its reply to an RTI question by the PTI, the Ministry of Women and Child Development said, "Over 33 lakh children in India are malnourished and more than half of them fall in the severely malnourished category with Maharashtra, Bihar, and Gujarat topping the list"<sup>20</sup>.

The SDG INDEX INDIA 2022, shows India's sluggish performance on SDG 2. India's composite score on SDG 2 was the bottommost amongst all the SDGs, demanding the need for robust policies and initiatives to end hunger in the country<sup>21</sup>.

As per Global Hunger Index 2022, with a score of 29.1, India ranked 107th among 121 countries and falls in the 'serious category'<sup>22</sup>. However as per, NFHS-5 statistics "Child Stunting in the country has decreased from 38.4% (NFHS-4, 2015-16) to 35.5% (NFHS- 5, 2019-21) and Child Wasting has decreased from 21.0% (NFHS-4, 2015-



16) to 19.3% (NFHS-5, 2019-21). Further, the percentage of underweight children has gone down from 35.8% (NFHS-4, 2015-16) to 32.1% (NFHS-5, 2019-21)"<sup>23</sup>.

Government efforts such as the National Food security act-2013<sup>24</sup> which recognizes the eldest women above the age of 18 years as the head of a household for getting rations at fair price shops, Integrated child development schemes<sup>25</sup> for providing free nutrition and meals or programmers like 'Breast Milk Bank'<sup>26</sup> to provide breast milk for pre-term, low birth weights, and orphan babies, the Government of Maharashtra initiative like "Centralised Kitchens for better nutrition"<sup>27</sup> or the 'Annapurna Central Kitchen'<sup>28</sup> all are revolving around the centrality of agency of women for combatting the Hunger in the country.

**GOAL 3: GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING-** Prevalence of poverty and hunger are the most critical factors that determine the health and well-being of individuals of every age and sex. As per the World Health Organisation's official definition, health is a "state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity"<sup>29</sup>. Women are responsible for around 80% of health care services provided in India<sup>30</sup> but still constitute the largest neglected and worst affected group in the country.

Discrimination from womb to Tomb, like Son Meta Preference and various other social pathologies like the "dowry system, early marriage, often results in mistreatment and abuse of women, which eventually leaves a negative impact on her overall health"<sup>31</sup>. The women's issue and their health requirements often remain at the margins of our developmental goals, where "75 percent of India's healthcare infrastructure is based in urban areas and only 1.3 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is for healthcare, which is significantly lower than the global average of 6 percent"<sup>32</sup>. As per the data released by National Family Health Survey-5, 67% of children below the age of five, 57% of women, and 25% of men in the age group of 15 years to 49 years are anaemic<sup>33</sup>, reflecting the acute state of health of women in the reproductive.

Recognising women's role in the realisation of universal health, the 75th World Health Assembly awarded India's one million all-women ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist Workers) workers and honored them for their outstanding "contribution to advancing global health, demonstrated leadership and commitment to regional health issues. ASHA (which means hope in Hindi) is the more than 1 million female volunteers who were honored for their crucial role in linking the community with the health system and ensuring those living in rural poverty can access primary health care services, throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic".

**GOAL 4: QUALITY EDUCATION-** Women's education plays a very important and critical role in the "overall development of the country, it not only helps in the development of half of the human resources but in improving the quality of life at home and outside". Various studies by recognised authors have highlighted the "role of education for the empowerment of women" and empowered women for the overall development of society. First Prime Minister of India, Pt. Nehru famously asserted "when you educate a man you educate a woman you educate a whole family".

With the passage of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act- 2009, deprived girls of rural India got a chance to have access to elementary education, and programs like Mid-Day Meal Schemes provide their poor parents with a valid reason to send them to schools, also led to retention rates among the girl students. Government efforts like Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, Rashtriya Uchchar Shiksha Abhiyan, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas have a direct positive impact on other employment-oriented educational programmes like Skill India Mission and Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana and many more.

Despite the encouraging realisation of SDG No.4, Higher Education in India has a low gross enrolment ratio, lower enrolment of women in STEM and issues of dropout at secondary and higher education are causes of concern. Government Initiatives like 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' also needed to take a more institutionalised and structural format to achieve the target of universal, equitable, and quality education.

**GOAL 5: GENDER EQUALITY-** Swami Vivekananda rightly asserted that "a bird can't fly on only one



wing", similarly no nation can fly high on the trajectory of development without the active participation of half of the population. Equal involvement and participation of persons of all 'Gender' which is a 'Social Construct' is the sin qua nun for achieving any social good and Sustainable Development.

Declining female labor force participation along with an increase in the gender wage gap, increase in crime against women and the LGBTQ+ community, marginal representation of women in Judiciary and politics, Sarpanch Pati in Panchayats, the phenomenon of 'glass ceiling' and feminisation of agriculture without the land title are few of the many challenges needs to be addressed immediately.

Government efforts like Bank-linked SHGs, provisions of MGNREGA, Jan Dhan Yojana, Mudra Yojana, and Matru Vandana Yojana are the efforts in the right direction but more needs to be done. The long pending Women reservation Bill51 in Parliament and the introduction of women reservation in the judiciary should be the beginning.

**GOAL NO 6: CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION-** This goal strives to achieve universal, affordable, and equitable access to drinking water, equitable access to sanitation and hygiene, and increasing water use efficiency through integrated water resource management. Water scarcity, mismanagement and wastage, surface water pollution, and deficiency of water treatment plants along with behavioral orthodoxy<sup>54</sup> make the road difficult.

As per the Government's report of the Ministry of Jal Shakti, "Women comprise roughly 30-40 percent of the volunteers - Swachhagrahis - who lead the process of 'triggering' behavior change at village level" and "significance of women's leadership does not lie only in the emergence of champions or role models. Change in behavior and attitudes at the community level is more likely when one leader catalyzes leadership among other women, leading to messages being communicated in different ways so that they spread across a large area".

**GOAL 7: AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY-** India under its 'Panchamrit' commitment at COP-26 Glasgow, looking ahead to attain non-fossil energy capacity to 500GW by 2030, 50% of energy requirement from renewables by 2030 to become a Net Zero nation by 2070.

Recognizing the active role of women in renewable energy, Elizabeth Cecelski in her research findings asserted that women are "mainstream users and often producers of energy. Without their involvement, renewable energy projects risk being inappropriate and failing. Women are the main users of household energy in developing and industrial countries; they influence or make many family purchases related to energy; they are experienced entrepreneurs in energy-related enterprises; women's organizations are effective promoters of new technologies". Government has been working to scale up decentralized Renewable Energy solutions to complement the grid extension efforts in rural areas, in turn providing multifarious growth opportunities for thousands of women". Mainstream government programmes like International Solar Alliance, PM Ujjwala Joyana, National Biogas, and Manure Management Programme have active participation of women. Their role especially in rural India is crucial not only for attaining SDGs but successfully achieving the Net Zero ambition.

**GOAL 8: DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH & GOAL 9: INDUSTRY INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE-** India is now the fifth largest economy in the world pushing Britain to the 6th slot and the contribution of women is more recognised than earlier. Robust Industries, an environment of innovation, and sustainable & resilient Infrastructure with the full and active participation of women are the key driver of sustainable economic growth. One of the main challenges of sustained economic growth is the underperforming Agriculture sector which employs more than 50% workforce but contribution hangs around in the range of 20%.

As per the data of OXFAM India, the Agriculture sector employs "around 80% of economically active women and they comprise 33% of the agriculture labour force and 48% of the self-employed farmers". Apart from agriculture farms, women contribute "47% in tea plantations; around 47% in cotton cultivation; 45% growing oil seeds, and 39% in vegetable production".

Despite having an immense contribution to the agriculture sector which is the backbone of economic growth and employment in India, female landholders are just 14% (Agriculture Census 2015-16). The industrial sector is



crippled with lower economic growth due to lower female labour force participation (FLFP) rate of 20% despite having high employability of 54% due to structural and institutional biases. Structural shocks like demonetisation, GST, and the Covid-19 lockdown have also led to a decline in the FLFPR.

Other challenges like forced labour, modern slavery- 18 million modern slaves in India as per Global Slavery Index 2016, child labour, and the nexus of human trafficking and drug abuses are the hurdles to sustainable economic growth.

India is fast becoming the Innovation capital of India, the country ranked 3rd in the start-up ecosystem and has the 3rd largest number of Unicorns in 2021.

But this environment of innovation is not inclusive and restricted to only certain private sectors. Public sector spending on R&D is still below 1% of GDP, the lowest in the world (NITI Aayog). India has one of the highest logistic losses in the world around 14% of GDP which is a huge cost due to the underdevelopment of Infrastructure.

Facilitating equal participation of women in every sub-sector of the economy and industry will not only be a catalytic agent for economic growth but also surge the quality of innovations in India with the inclusion of a varied standpoint in STEM which will have a direct influence on building resilient infrastructure with the help of domestic technology development.

**GOAL 10: REDUCED INEQUALITIES-** Women are the worst victims of the persistent inequalities in society but they are the torch bearer and active agents of an egalitarian society. At the international level, a study by IMF in 2015 found that "gender inequality is strongly associated with income inequality across time and countries of all income groups, even after controlling for the standard drivers of income inequality, which include financial openness and deepening, technological progress and labour market institutions".

Rights given to marginalised sections make sense only when the rights are provided to women of all ages and section, which would lead to a deduction in abject inequalities. Government initiatives like National Social Assistance Programme, Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, Code on Wages, PM- KISAN, Panchayati Raj reforms and affirmative action policies for SC/STs and OBCs and like to address inequalities and exclusion are focused on women to achieve the constitutional objective of social, political and economic equality.

**GOAL 11: SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES & GOAL 12: RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION-** A paper by Lisa Juanola emphasizes the role of women as their "production and consumption patterns tend to be more resource-efficient, they are more likely to recycle and they make more sustainable decisions for their households and businesses. Such pathways also have the potential to contribute to poverty alleviation, the transition towards low-carbon and green economies, and inclusive, gender-equitable sustainable development". Government and society must provide them "equal access to means such as land and technology that can boost their standard of living and increase their participation in consumption and production".

The Success of programmes of the government like the Smart Cities Mission, AMRUT, Housing for all, National Disaster Management Plan, National Mission on Sustainable Agriculture, GRIHA and Concept of L.I.F.E. as propounded by the Prime Minister rely heavily on the proactive role of women.

**GOAL 13: CLIMATE ACTION, GOAL 14: LIFE BELOW WATER & GOAL 15: LIFE ON LAND-** Climate change is a real-life threat for most marginalised and backward communities around the world and women are the worst victims of these climatic-associated events.

Women are at the frontline of any effort to fight climate change and associated natural disasters. Empowered and educated women work effectively towards reducing carbon footprints, and developing innovative and local solutions to fight climate change like sustainable farming. India's National Action Plan on Climate Change, the Paris Agreement under UNFCCC, programmes for conserving Mangroves and Coral Reefs, combating desertification through the National Afforestation Programme, and many alike require active participation and leadership of women.

**GOAL 16: PEACE, JUSTICE, AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS AND GOAL 17: PARTNERSHIP**



**FOR GOALS-** In every violent conflict and war around the world, children and women are the prime targets of violence. The irony remains that even today women are excluded from the decisions making tables about peace and war and feminists cite this as the prime reason for present global disorder and chaos. Now it is globally recognised that women are the agents of change and have the potential to lead the world toward a better future. United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 recognises the leadership role of women to bring peace at the regional and global level and their natural role in building a partnership for sustainable development. India's led initiatives like all women peacekeeping force at UN Peacekeeping, South-South Cooperation, Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, INSC, and policy of neighbourhood first or Aatmanirbhar Bharat with global outreach hinges on the capabilities of women to lead India and the world.

**CONCLUSION-** Women make up half of the world's population, yet they often shoulder a disproportionate burden of poverty, violence, and insecurity. Women play a critical role in achieving the target of developed India @ 47. In many societies, women shoulder the majority of unpaid care work, such as caring for children and elders. This limits women's time and opportunities to participate in paid employment and earn an income. Women also face barriers to education and political participation, which can prevent them from having a say in decision-making that affects their lives. When women are empowered and have equal opportunities as men, they can help drive progress toward the SDGs. When women can participate fully in society, economies grow and communities thrive. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to empowering women and achieving gender equality- therefore, each country must tailor its policies and programs to meet its specific needs and context.

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