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IILM UNIVERSITY

THE CIVIL LENS

Zooming in on what matters

An Initiative by the students of MA Public Policy (2025-27), IILM University, Greater Noida

This Month's Exclusive Read

Do we want to build a society where identity is easier to live, or simply harder to prove?

Read Inside

Achieving gender equality requires the engagement of women and men, boys and girls. It is everyone's responsibility.

Ban Ki-Moon

The absence of recognition translates into the assumption of an "ideal worker" unburdened by domestic responsibilities.

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Infrastructure and Governance

What the economy doesn't count, it pays for

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There is a quiet, almost invisible tax that economies pay when gender inequality persists. It doesn't appear neatly in fiscal deficits or inflation charts; it seeps in through lost hours, unrealised ambition, and decisions shaped not by choice, but by constraint. In a country as vast and complex as India, the economic cost of gender is not just a social concern; it is a structural one, woven into policy, labour markets, and everyday life.

Over the years, India has built an impressive architecture of gender-focused policies. Campaigns like Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao sought to correct deep-rooted cultural imbalances, while legislative measures such as the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017, aimed to make workplaces more inclusive. Financial inclusion programs like Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana opened millions of bank accounts for women, quietly shifting the balance of economic agency within households. On paper, the intent is progressive, even transformative.

But policy, like poetry, is judged not just by its intention… but by its impact.

Consider maternity benefits. Extending paid leave to 26 weeks was a landmark step, aligning India with some of the most progressive global standards. It recognised care work, acknowledged motherhood, and attempted to humanise the workplace. Yet, beneath this progress lies a complicated economic ripple. For many firms, especially in the informal and semi-formal sectors, the increased cost of employing women has subtly influenced hiring choices. The consequence is not always overt discrimination, but quiet hesitation. In trying to protect women within the workforce, the policy risks limiting their entry into it.

Then there is the question of mobility, perhaps one of the most understated economic variables. Safety policies for women have expanded, but infrastructure has not always kept pace. When public transport feels unsafe or urban spaces remain poorly designed, women adapt by restricting their movement. They choose jobs closer to home, opt out of late shifts, or withdraw from the workforce altogether. These are deeply personal decisions with profoundly economic consequences. Every constrained commute is a lost contribution to productivity.

Yet, not all stories here are cautionary. Financial inclusion has quietly rewritten parts of the narrative. Through schemes like Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, women have gained access to banking systems, credit, and direct benefit transfers. This is not merely administrative efficiency; it is empowerment in its most tangible form. When women control financial resources, spending patterns shift. Investments in children's education, healthcare, and nutrition rise. The economy, in turn, benefits from a healthier, more educated population. These are long-term dividends, often underestimated because they do not yield immediate, headline-worthy results.

And still, beneath all policy efforts lies a persistent blind spot: unpaid care work. Across urban apartments and rural households alike, women shoulder the invisible economy, cooking, caregiving, managing homes, and sustaining families. This labour is essential, relentless, and entirely excluded from formal economic measurement. GDP does not count it. Policy rarely compensates it. Yet without it, the visible economy would falter. The absence of recognition translates into the absence of support, limited childcare infrastructure, inadequate eldercare systems, and workplaces that still assume an "ideal worker" unburdened by domestic responsibilities.

The economic cost of gender inequality, then, is not a single number. It is cumulative and compounding. It appears as lower female labour force participation, which in India remains significantly below global averages. It surfaces as reduced innovation when diverse perspectives are missing from decision-making tables. It manifests as slower GDP growth, not because the economy lacks potential, but because it underutilises half its human capital.

What becomes clear is that policy cannot afford to operate in fragments. Gender is not a sector…it is a lens. Labour laws, urban planning, education systems, and financial policies must each account for the lived realities of women. A maternity policy without parallel childcare support is incomplete. Financial inclusion without employment opportunities is limiting. Safety measures without urban redesign are insufficient.

There is also a need to rethink how success is measured. Beyond counting how many women are included, the focus must shift to how they are included, on what terms, with what support, and with what long-term outcomes.

Inclusion that comes with invisible penalties is not inclusion; it is compromise.

And yet, there is reason for optimism. The conversation is changing. Women are not just beneficiaries of policy- they are becoming architects of it. From grassroots entrepreneurship to leadership in governance and corporate spaces, the narrative is expanding. The economy is beginning to recognise what it has long overlooked: that gender equality is not merely a moral imperative, but an economic one.

Because when women move freely, work fully, and are valued equally, something shifts- not just in households, but in the very rhythm of the economy. Growth becomes more inclusive, resilience deepens, and prosperity feels less like a statistic and more like a shared experience.

The cost of gender inequality is high. But the return on equality? That, perhaps, is the most undervalued investment India has yet to fully make.

India's way of promoting Gender Equality

India has adopted several policies aimed at promoting gender equality and empowering women across social and economic spheres. These initiatives reflect a growing recognition that inclusive development requires addressing structural inequalities.

One of the most prominent initiatives is Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP), launched in 2015. It focuses on addressing the declining child sex ratio and promoting girls' education. The policy combines awareness campaigns with targeted interventions to challenge gender bias and improve access to schooling for girls, particularly in underserved regions.

Another key policy is the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017, which increased paid maternity leave from 12 to 26 weeks for women in the formal sector. It aims to support working mothers and improve child health outcomes. However, it has also sparked debate regarding its impact on female employment due to increased costs for employers.

The Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) has played a significant role in financial inclusion. By enabling women to open bank accounts and access direct benefit transfers, it has strengthened their economic agency. Financial independence, even at a basic level, often translates into greater decision-making power within households.

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 is another crucial step. It mandates organizations to establish internal complaints committees and ensures a safer working environment for women. This policy addresses a key barrier to female workforce participation, workplace safety and dignity.

Lastly, the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001) provides a broader framework for advancing women's rights. It focuses on equal access to education, healthcare, employment, and political participation, guiding various gender-focused schemes and programs in India.

Beyond representation: rethinking gender equality in policy and practice

Reflections from the 9th Gender Equality Summit 2026

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On 6 March 2026, the 9th Gender Equality Summit organized by United Nations Global Compact Network India at Taj Mansingh Hotel brought together policymakers, corporate leaders, academics, and social advocates to discuss the evolving discourse on gender equality. The summit was positioned at a crucial moment when India stands at what speakers repeatedly called a "decisive decade" for gender rights, climate action, and social justice. The discussions highlighted how gender equality is no longer merely a moral aspiration but increasingly recognized as an economic and institutional necessity.

The opening session set the tone by emphasizing the progress India has made in increasing women's participation across sectors. Compared to previous decades, women's presence in the workforce and decision-making spaces has grown considerably. Yet, the discussions quickly made it clear that participation alone does not necessarily translate into structural equality. True gender equality requires transforming institutions, policies, and social norms that shape opportunities and outcomes.
As one speaker noted during the opening dialogue: "Gender equality is not a women's issue alone; it is an economic imperative, a governance priority, and a societal responsibility."

One of the key themes that emerged was the intersection between climate change, labour conditions, and gender vulnerability. Climate change is no longer viewed simply as an environmental concern but as a systemic risk affecting economies, industries, and social structures. Speakers highlighted how climate stress increasingly influences workplace productivity, labour conditions, and business sustainability.

A particularly compelling example discussed during the summit involved a textile manufacturing unit in northern India that faced severe productivity challenges during extreme heatwaves. Due to rising temperatures, management had to stagger work shifts, absenteeism increased, and overall output declined. Women workers were especially affected because they often carry the additional burden of unpaid household and caregiving responsibilities. When climate conditions intensify workplace stress, these dual responsibilities place women in an even more vulnerable position.

This example illustrated an important insight repeatedly emphasised during the summit: climate risk and gender risk often combine to become business risk. In other words, environmental disruptions cannot be separated from social inequalities. Businesses, policymakers, and institutions must therefore treat gender equality and climate resilience as interconnected challenges.

During a panel discussion on corporate social responsibility, a participant summarised this intersection succinctly: "When climate risks disrupt livelihoods, gender inequalities deepen. Sustainable development, therefore, demands that climate resilience and gender inclusion move together."

Another central idea presented was the need to shift from symbolic commitments to measurable outcomes. Gender equality initiatives often remain limited to corporate pledges, diversity statements, or awareness campaigns.

While these efforts are important, they must translate into structural changes in hiring practices, workplace policies, leadership representation, and wage equity.

Speakers suggested three major shifts that organisations must adopt. First, gender commitments must move from aspirational language to accountable and measurable action. Second, gender considerations must be mainstreamed into economic systems, rather than being treated as isolated social initiatives. Finally, gender equality must shift from being a matter of corporate values to becoming a performance metric, influencing institutional evaluation and long-term strategy.

As one panellist emphasised while discussing workplace reforms: “Diversity statements may start the conversation, but measurable inclusion is what ultimately transforms institutions.”

The economic argument for gender equality was also strongly emphasised. Studies suggest that closing gender gaps in employment and leadership could add trillions of dollars to the global economy. Women currently constitute a large portion of the informal workforce and are heavily represented in sectors that are highly vulnerable to climate disruptions, such as agriculture, textiles, and small-scale manufacturing. Therefore, addressing gender inequality is not only a matter of fairness but also essential for sustainable economic growth.

While these discussions were insightful and necessary, one observation stood out during the summit. Although the event was framed around “gender equality,” most discussions focused on women's empowerment and participation. Undoubtedly, the historical marginalisation of women in social, economic, and political spaces justifies significant attention to women's issues. However, gender equality is inherently more inclusive.

Gender equality should encompass all gender identities, including men, transgender individuals, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. In many policy discussions, the experiences of these groups remain largely invisible. For example, transgender individuals continue to face severe discrimination in education, employment, and healthcare access despite legal recognition in India. Similarly, LGBTQ+ individuals frequently encounter structural barriers that limit their participation in economic and public life.

Even within the discourse on masculinity, there are emerging concerns that deserve attention. Certain groups of men, particularly those belonging to marginalized caste, class, or regional backgrounds, may also experience forms of social and economic exclusion. Addressing gender equality therefore requires moving beyond a single-group framework toward a more comprehensive understanding of gender as a spectrum of identities and experiences.

From a public policy perspective, this broader view of gender equality raises several important questions. How can policies move beyond symbolic recognition toward genuine inclusivity? How can governance frameworks incorporate the needs of diverse gender groups while still addressing historical inequalities? And how can policymakers ensure that gender-sensitive policies do not inadvertently exclude certain communities?

India has already taken some steps in this direction through policies such as the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act and increased focus on gender budgeting. However, implementation gaps remain significant. Policy solutions must therefore focus on expanding access to education, employment opportunities, healthcare, and legal protection for all gender identities.

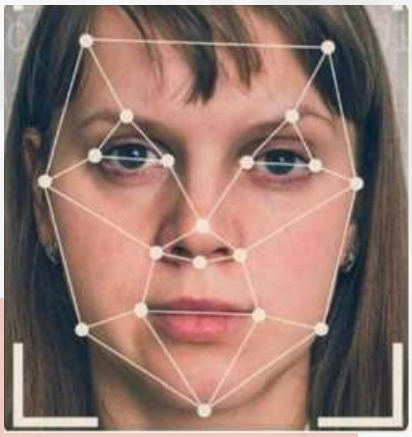
Furthermore, gender equality policies should also intersect with other critical policy domains such as climate resilience, urban planning, labour policy, and social welfare. For instance, workplace regulations that address heat stress, childcare support systems, and flexible work arrangements can significantly improve gender-inclusive participation in the workforce.

As a student of public policy, attending this summit reinforced an important lesson: gender equality cannot be addressed through isolated initiatives. It must be embedded within the broader architecture of governance and development planning. Policies must acknowledge the complexity of gender relations and ensure that inclusion becomes a systemic objective rather than a symbolic commitment.

The summit ultimately highlighted both the progress made and the challenges that remain. It reaffirmed that gender equality is essential not only for social justice but also for economic resilience, climate adaptation, and institutional stability. At the same time, it reminded us that the discourse on gender equality must continue evolving to become more inclusive and intersectional.

As India moves toward its developmental goals for 2047, the success of its social and economic transformation will depend significantly on how effectively it addresses issues of equality and inclusion. Gender equality, in this context, must be understood not as a narrow category but as a comprehensive framework that recognizes and supports the dignity, rights, and opportunities of all individuals, regardless of gender identity. Only then can gender equality truly move from a slogan to a sustainable reality.

DIGITALGENDER DRIVEN ABUSE



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"Deep fakes are AI-generated images and audio that realistically manipulate a person's face or voice, making it appear as though they are doing or saying something they never did."

In recent years, deep fakes have increasingly been used for malicious purposes. What began as experimental media has turned into a widespread tool for harassment, blackmail and misinformation. With just a few publicly available photos, individuals can now create highly realistic fake content, often without the victim ever knowing until it has spread online. At its core, the issue reflects deeper gender inequality as it is not a gender-neutral technological problem- they mirror and amplifies patriarchal structures that already exist in society.

Control over women's bodies and identities, long embedded in the social system, is now being exercised through digital means. In this way, technology is not dismantling patriarchy; it is reshaping and reinforcing it in a more pervasive and less visible form.

Data highlights how disproportionately women are affected. Reports suggest that over 90% of deepfake content online is pornographic, and the overwhelming majority of victims are women.

Increasingly, even teenage girls are targets, with their social media photos manipulated into explicit material without consent. These acts are not just violations of privacy but also a form of gender based digital violence. The response to such abuse often reveals another layer of inequality. Instead of holding perpetrators accountable, women and girls are frequently told to limit their online presence-avoid posting photos, restrict social media use, or "stay safe by staying invisible. This shifts responsibility on victims, reinforcing the idea that women must shrink their participation in public and digital life to avoid harm.

Presence vs. Power: The Real Story of Women in Indian Politics

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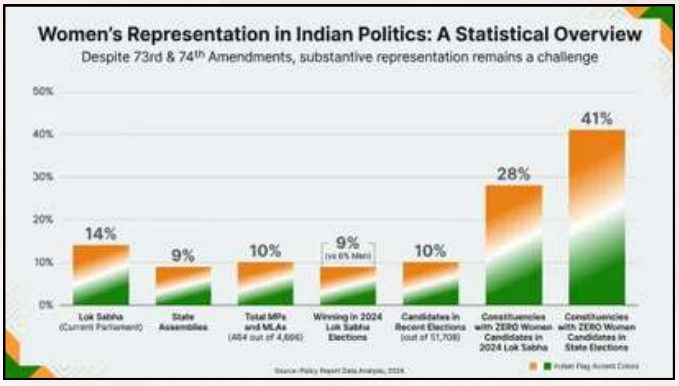
While women's roles in Indian politics have evolved, they continue to hit significant roadblocks. The 73rd and 74th Amendments in the 1990s were a turning point, mandating one-third reservation in panchayats and municipalities. Today, lakhs of women serve as Sarpanchs or Councillors, creating a visible "descriptive representation" that finally reflects India's demographic reality. However, a deeper look reveals a persistent gap: being elected is not the same as having power.

But the real issue is that just "being there" doesn't mean having power. Descriptive representation is about being visible, but substantive representation is about whether these women can actually make decisions, control the budget, or run projects. In too many places, that just isn't happening. The "Sarpanch-Pati" thing is still a huge problem where a husband or male relative runs the show while the woman just holds the title. Add to that old-school patriarchal thinking, a lack of political experience, and straight-up opposition from men who don't want to listen to a woman, and you see why the actual authority stays with the men.

Higher up in State Assemblies and Parliament, where there are no reservations yet, the numbers are even worse. The ADR (The Association for Democratic Reforms) report from March 2026 provides a harsh statistical reality check. Out of 4,666 total MPs and MLAs, only 464 are women.

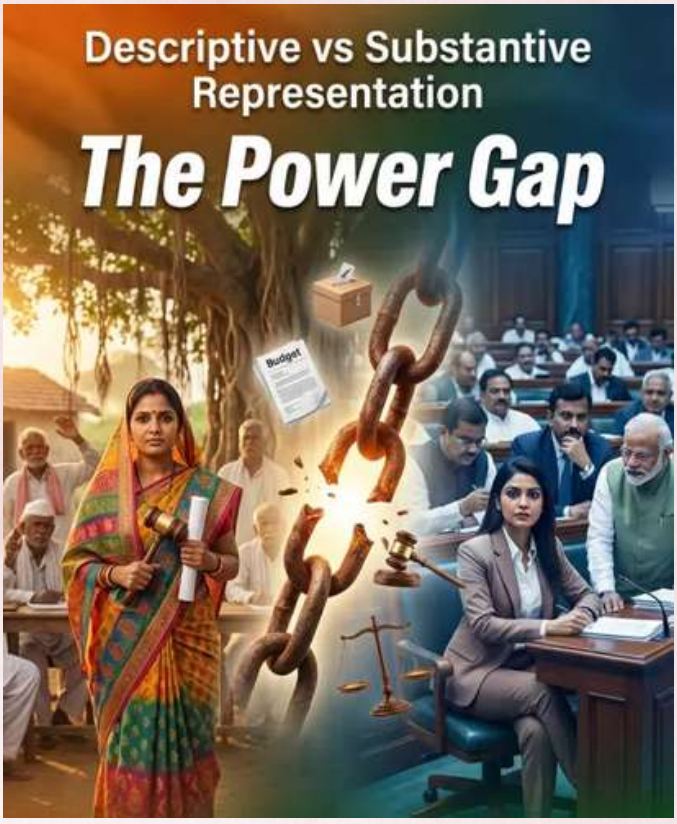


That's just 10%. In the current Lok Sabha, it's only 14% (74 seats), and in state assemblies, it drops to 9%.

The "gatekeeping" starts at the nomination stage. Out of 51,708 candidates analysed in recent elections, only 10% were women. In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, nearly 28% of constituencies had zero women on the ballot. In state elections, that figure jumped to 41%.

The irony? When women do get to fight, they win more often. In 2024, 9% of women candidates won compared to 6% of men. This proves that voters aren't the problem, the parties are. Parties still lean toward women from established political dynasties or wealthy backgrounds. It shows how little inner-party democracy exists and how many old ideas still float around that women can't win on their own.

The Women's Reservation Bill, 128th Amendment, is now law, but it's stuck waiting for a new census and delimitation. Some experts think it won't be active until 2029. Local quotas have already proven that reservations can create role models, but real power needs more than just a law. We need to stop "proxy" leaders, give women financial independence, and force parties to give tickets fairly. Women are voting at almost the same rate as men now. The people are ready for this change, even if the political system isn't.



The Mirror of Identity: Unpacking the 2026 Transgender Rights Amendment

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There are moments in a nation's journey where a piece of legislation stops being just a collection of clauses and starts acting as a mirror. These laws reflect more than just our regulatory habits; they reveal what we truly believe about the people standing right in front of us. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill of 2026 is exactly that kind of mirror. Passed this March, it has sparked a conversation that is as complicated and contested as it is deeply human. At its heart lies a shift that feels quiet on paper but profound in practice: the removal of the right to self-perceived gender identity. In its place, the state has introduced a gatekeeper- a system of medical boards and administrative authorities. It's a move that transforms an internal truth ("I am") into an external request for permission ("You are, but only if we say so").

To understand why this has sent such a tremor through our social fabric, we have to look back to 2014 and the landmark NALSA v. Union of India judgment. Back then, the Supreme Court did something radical: it anchored gender identity to the concepts of dignity and autonomy. The court essentially argued that gender isn't something the state "assigns" to you like a tax bracket; it is something an individual experiences and defines for themselves.

It was a philosophical victory that echoed the work of thinkers like Judith Butler, who famously suggested that gender is a lived, fluid performance rather than a static biological fact. By narrowing the definition of what it means to be "transgender" and requiring medical certification, the 2026 amendment effectively dismantles that foundation, trading lived experience for a clinical, categorical checklist.

However, if we are to be honest with ourselves, we have to acknowledge the "uncomfortable truth" that lingers in the background of this debate. Policy doesn't exist in a vacuum; it operates in a messy, imperfect world where systems are often stretched thin. There is a persistent, though often whispered, fear that self-identification, if left entirely unregulated, could be exploited for strategic gains in welfare schemes or legal protections. It is this fear of "misuse" that has quietly steered public sentiment and legislative caution. But here is where the tension tightens: in a frantic attempt to prevent a few people from gaming the system, the law risks overcorrecting. It moves us away from a culture of trust and autonomy and toward a culture of surveillance and constant verification.

From the bustling streets of Mumbai to the temples of Madurai, the outcry from the community hasn't just been about red tape, it's been about erasure. For many trans individuals, the requirement of a medical board isn't just a bureaucratic hurdle; it is a fundamental violation. It subjects their most private sense of self to the scrutiny of institutions that, historically, have not always been empathetic or even educated regarding gender diversity. Furthermore, by focusing heavily on traditional socio-cultural categories like hijra or kinner, the law inadvertently leaves out a massive spectrum of people, trans men, non-binary individuals, and those who don't fit into a pre-approved box. In an attempt to define the community, the state may actually be diminishing it.

We also cannot ignore the psychological toll of being told your identity is "pending approval." Mental health experts have been vocal about the consequences of denying self-identity, linking it to spikes in anxiety, depression, and a crushing sense of invisibility. After all, identity isn't just about what's printed on a plastic ID card; it's about the basic human need to be recognised. Historically, India has always known that gender exists beyond a simple binary; the hijra community has occupied a sacred, if complex, space for centuries. It is a strange irony that a society with such a long history of acknowledging gender fluidity is now struggling to fit that same spirit into narrow, clinical frames.

Ultimately, the 2026 amendment poses a question that goes far beyond the law: Do we want to build a society where identity is easier to live, or simply harder to prove? While an economy can survive a few inefficiencies and a legal system can handle minor imperfections, a society cannot truly thrive if its people feel like they are constantly on trial just for existing. The challenge isn't choosing between regulation and dignity; it's designing a world that honours both. As we move forward, we must remember that we aren't just debating definitions or documents. We are deciding what it means to belong.

A Note from the desk of Editor-in-Chief

Some conversations don't arrive gently. they demand to be felt, questioned, and sat with. This edition of The Civil Lens steps into one such space. As India navigates the evolving contours of gender through the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026, we find ourselves at the intersection of law, identity, and lived reality.

This is not a story of binaries, right or wrong, progress or regression. It is a story of tension. Between autonomy and accountability. Between selfhood and state recognition. Between the need to safeguard systems and the need to protect dignity.

In curating this piece, I found myself holding two truths at once. That policy must anticipate misuse in an imperfect world. And that, in doing so, it must not lose sight of the very people it seeks to include. Because when identity becomes something to be certified rather than understood, we risk turning lived experience into paperwork.

This edition invites you to read not just with agreement or disagreement, but with curiosity. To question where we draw lines, who draws them, and at what cost.

Because sometimes, the most important role of policy is not just to govern- but to listen.

~Ipsita Sachdev

When justice delays, it denies: how a slow legal system compounds gender violence

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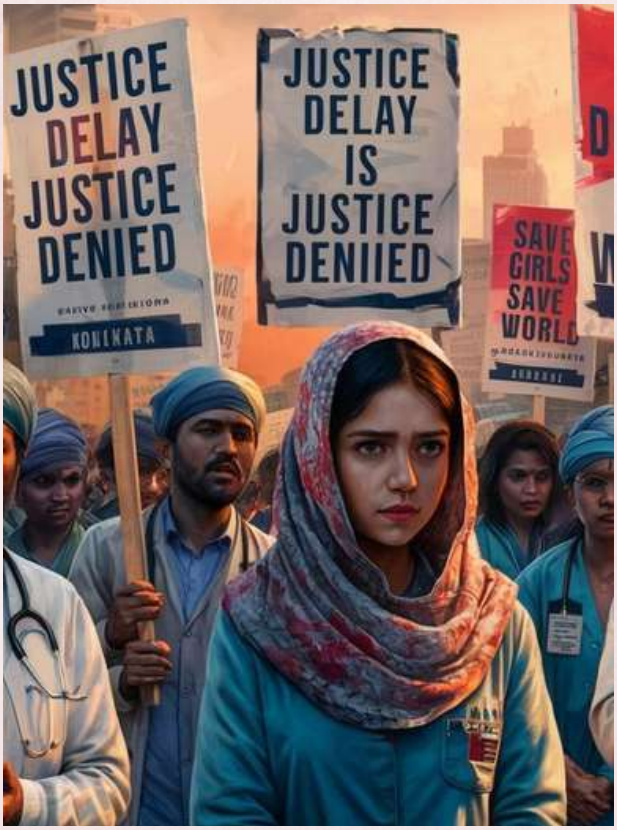
In India, cases of gender-based violence often spark immediate public outrage and demands for harsh punishment. Yet beyond the headlines lies a quieter, more pervasive reality: survivors are forced into years of waiting as their cases crawl through the legal system. Between delayed investigations, repeated adjournments, and overburdened courts, justice becomes a prolonged process that erodes both evidence and hope. In this gap between crime and conviction, justice is not merely delayed; it is effectively denied.

The scale of the problem is significant. With a plethora of cases pending across Indian courts, crimes against women form a substantial portion of this backlog. Trials in sexual violence cases can take months or even years to conclude, and that is only after the case reaches court; the investigative stage itself is many times slow and flawed. For survivors, this means repeatedly revisiting their trauma through court appearances, cross-examinations, and interactions with a system that treats their case as one among thousands. Meanwhile, the accused are frequently out on bail, creating opportunities for intimidation and coercion. Many survivors withdraw complaints not because justice was served, but because the process became unbearable.

This prolonged legal journey results in what can be called "secondary victimisation." The survivor's ordeal does not end with the crime; it is extended by the system meant to deliver justice. The emotional, financial, and social toll of long trials is immense. Survivors may lose jobs, face stigma, or experience threats, all while navigating a slow and often insensitive legal process. These burdens fall even more heavily on marginalised women, who must also contend with caste, class, or religious biases within institutions like the police and judiciary.

The causes of delay go beyond simple judicial backlog. Investigations are often weakened by a lack of resources, inadequate forensic support, and poor training in handling sexual assault cases. Prosecution systems are overstretched, and defence strategies frequently exploit procedural loopholes to prolong trials. While fast-track courts and legal reforms have been introduced, their implementation



remains inconsistent, limiting their impact.

One of the most serious consequences of delay is the creation of an "impunity gap." When cases drag on for years without resolution, the deterrent power of the law diminishes. Perpetrators may feel emboldened, and public confidence in the justice system declines. Even when justice is eventually delivered, it often comes too late to restore the survivor's sense of dignity or security.

Addressing this issue requires more than increasing the number of courts. It calls for a systemic shift toward a time-bound, survivor-centric approach. This includes better investigative practices, specialised prosecutors, effective witness protection, and accountability for unnecessary delays. Speedy trials must be treated not as an aspiration but as an essential component of justice.

Ultimately, the right to a speedy trial is part of the fundamental right to life and dignity. For survivors of gender violence, every delay prolongs suffering and weakens trust in the system. Justice cannot be meaningful if it arrives years too late. Until the legal system recognises that time itself is central to justice, it will continue to fail those it is meant to protect.

Gender Stereotypes in Indian Education

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Education plays a very important role in shaping the thinking and personality of students. It is meant to provide equal opportunities to everyone. However, even today, gender stereotypes continue to exist in the Indian education system. Gender stereotypes are fixed beliefs about what boys and girls can or cannot do. These ideas create inequality and limit the potential of students. From the early years of schooling, children are often influenced by such stereotypes.

Teachers and parents may expect boys to perform better in subjects like mathematics and science, while girls are often encouraged to focus on languages or arts. This creates a mindset that certain subjects are suitable only for a particular gender. As a result, many students hesitate to choose subjects according to their interests and abilities. Textbooks also contribute to this problem.

In many cases, men are shown as doctors, engineers, or leaders, while women are presented as homemakers or doing household work. Such examples send a message to students that these roles are fixed. This limits their thinking and discourages them from exploring different career options. A girl may feel unsure about becoming a scientist, while a boy may feel uncomfortable choosing a career in dance or fashion.

In sports and extracurricular activities, the difference is clearly visible. Boys are usually encouraged to take part in outdoor sports like cricket and football, while girls are guided towards activities such as dance, music, or drawing. Although all activities are valuable, the issue arises when students are not given the freedom to choose what they truly enjoy. This limits their overall development. Girls are often advised to choose careers that are considered “safe” or “suitable,” such as teaching or nursing. Boys, on the other hand, are encouraged to take up careers in engineering, business, or defence services.

This unequal guidance affects the future of students and reduces diversity in different professions. The main reason behind these stereotypes is the influence of society. They reflect their values and beliefs. In many families, girls are expected to take care of household work, while boys are given more freedom. The impact of gender stereotypes can be serious. They reduce self-confidence, create pressure, and limit opportunities. Girls may feel that they are less capable, while boys may feel forced to follow certain expectations. This can affect their mental and emotional well-being and stop them from reaching their full potential.

To remove gender stereotypes from education, collective efforts are needed. Teachers should encourage equal participation in all subjects and activities. Schools should provide equal opportunities to every student. Parents should support their children’s choices without imposing gender-based restrictions. Most importantly, students themselves should learn to respect each other and believe in equality. In conclusion, gender stereotypes in Indian education are a challenge, but they can be overcome. Education should empower students, not limit them. By promoting equality and fairness, we can create a system where every student has the freedom to learn, grow, and achieve their dreams without any barriers.

“A girl excluded from education becomes a woman excluded from a secure livelihood and decision-making. Gender equality in education secures every child’s right to learn, thrive and lead. We’re showing that when we co-create solutions with young women who have navigated the very challenges we work to address, partnering with communities and governments, we can transform education systems to better serve all children.”

Angeline Murimirwa
CEO, CAMFED

From Policy gap to progress: paternity leave and Viksit Bharat 2047

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India is moving toward becoming a developed nation by 2047 under the Viksit Bharat initiative. This vision does not focus only on economic growth but also on social progress, gender equality, and inclusive development in society. One of the persistent issues that remains unseen is gender inequality within households and caregiving roles.

We often talk about reservations for women and policies like maternity leave or even menstrual leave. But do we actually consider women as equal breadwinners? Why is there no conversation around the paternity leave policies in India?

While maternity leave is legally recognised and supported in many places, the father's role in childcare isn't always fully acknowledged. The question remains: does our current legal and policy system truly promote gender equality, or does it still follow traditional societal norms?

Introducing a paternity leave policy in India would make it a step towards gender justice, a healthy family, and a more progressive Society.

At present, India does not have a comprehensive law or Policy mandating paternity leave, but in a few central government services, employees are entitled to take paternity leave. Under the central civil services leave rules, the Male employee has the advantage of paternity leave around the time of childbirth. However, this benefit cannot be availed by the male working in the private sector, as they make up a large portion of India's workforce. This creates gender inequality and also differentiation between the two working classes.

Recently received, the Supreme Court on 18th March urged the centre to recognise paternity leave as a social security benefit as it highlights the overlooked role of father and caring of newborn stating that society has historically attributed, caregiving and nurturing responsibilities almost to all mothers, while the role of mother is untenable central to a child's emotional, physical and psychological development is incomplete without the significant role of father, a bench of justice, JB, Pardiwala and R Madhavan said.

Traditionally, childcare in India is considered solely to be a woman's responsibility. Even today, women are expected to handle physical recovery after the postpartum period, along with taking care of the child, doing all the household chores, and in many cases, continuing to contribute financially as well. This places an immense, emotional and physical burden on the women.

A mandated paternity leave Policy would help this burden be shared equally by both parents. This would also positively impact the societal stigmas, and along with this, employers will no longer see childcare as a female-only issue. With respect to this policy, workplace discrimination against women will be reduced and will promote a more gender equal environment in the offices.

In the long term, such policies can encourage more women to work even after having a child, which is important for India's economic growth. A Developed nation like India cannot afford to lose a large part of its skilled female workers due to the lack of supportive policies.

Paternity leave policy will ensure that fathers are physically present with their child along with their wife, during this crucial period and will also help share household responsibilities, as mothers often go through postpartum depression, as well as physical weakness and emotional anxiety during this period. The presence and support of their husband will play a significant role in reducing their stress and anxiety. Stronger families lead to stronger societies where parents share equal responsibilities of their children. There is equal respect between gender shapes children, attitudes, and behaviour into a more gender sensitive person.

This vision of Viksit Bharat slowly focuses on the inclusivity of all genders in the holistic development, social, economic, and institutional development. A developed nation is not just defined by its economic values, such as GDP, but also by how happy its citizens are and how progressive their policies are.

At the end, if India truly has a vision to become a Viksit Bharat by 2047, recognising paternity leave will not only be a policy choice, but it will be a step towards defining equality itself.

Women in politics and policy

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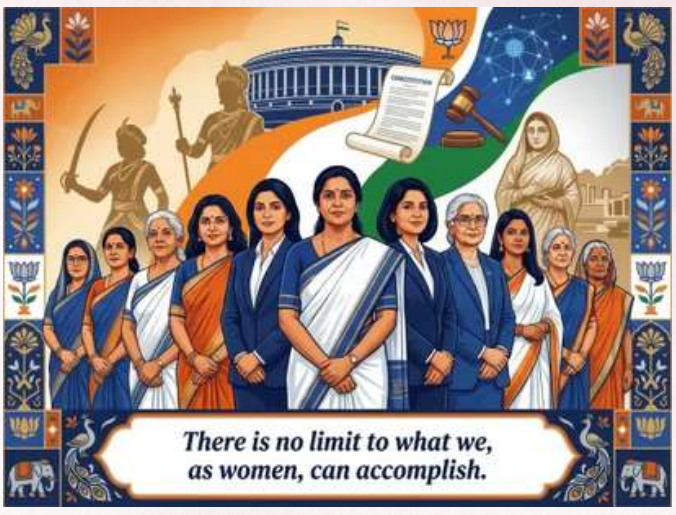
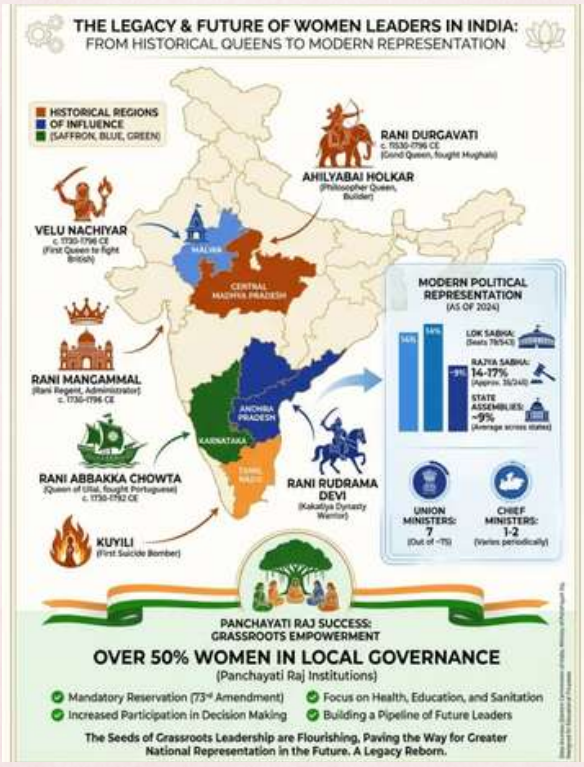
Women in politics and policy are increasingly shaping the future of India, continuing a legacy deeply rooted in history, especially in the South, where powerful queens redefined leadership through courage, strategy, and governance. Tamil Nadu and nearby regions have witnessed iconic rulers such as Velu Nachiyar, who led one of the earliest revolts against British rule and formed alliances to reclaim her kingdom, and Rani Mangammal, celebrated for her administrative excellence, road networks, and welfare policies. Equally inspiring is Rani Velu Nachiyar's commander Kuyili, remembered for her ultimate sacrifice as India's first recorded suicide warrior, setting fire to British ammunition stores. Beyond Tamil Nadu, queens like Rani Rudrama Devi broke gender norms by ruling as a monarch in the 13th century and strengthening fortifications and governance systems, while Rani Abbakka Chowta fiercely resisted Portuguese colonial forces through naval warfare. Rani Durgavati is remembered for her bravery in battle against the Mughals, choosing valour over surrender, and Ahilyabai Holkar stands out as a model administrator who built temples, roads, and dharamshalas across India, promoting inclusive development.

This powerful lineage of women leadership continues in modern India, but women hold only about 14% of Lok Sabha seats, around 14–17% in the Rajya Sabha, roughly 9% in state assemblies, about 7 positions in the Union Council of Ministers, and only one or two Chief Ministers nationwide, despite making up nearly half the population. However, the success of nearly 46% women's participation in Panchayati Raj institutions shows the transformative potential of inclusive policies.





Women leaders in India are increasingly influencing policy frameworks in areas such as:

- Climate change and sustainability
- Education reform
- Public health systems
- Gender equality and labour participation

Their leadership often emphasises inclusivity, long-term impact, and grassroots engagement, bringing fresh perspectives to complex national challenges. "There is no limit to what we, as women, can accomplish," says Michelle Obama.

Women in politics are not just breaking ceilings; they are reshaping the system itself. As India moves forward, their leadership will be central to building a more inclusive, progressive, and resilient nation. As Indira Gandhi once said, "You cannot shake hands with a clenched fist," reminding us that true leadership combines strength with vision and qualities that women have consistently demonstrated from ancient queens who built and defended kingdoms to modern policymakers shaping India's democratic future, making it essential to further expand their representation for a more inclusive and balanced society.

The guilt of choosing oneself: understanding gendered conditioning through a human rights lens

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Imagine a cage made of invisible spokes; you can see outside, the world can see in, yet you can not step out and enjoy your freedom. This is how conditioning quietly operates. Girls are raised being taught that they always have to protect others' feelings, even if this comes at the cost of sacrificing themselves. This glorification of sacrifice defines ideal mothers, obedient wives and dutiful daughters who trade their world to conform to the needs of the men of the house.

This conditioning takes root in the psyche and becomes so strong that even international laws seem to be outweighed by it. Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) says, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Yet the conformist upbringing proves otherwise. Girls are born free, but raised to please. In her 2025 review, Rashi A. Ulman explains how patriarchal values like control and objectification quietly become internalised through social learning. Over time, women start to monitor and suppress themselves, believing it's part of "normal femininity" or even "self-improvement." She also points out that women often downplay their achievements, seek male validation, or even criticise other women who defy traditional gender norms.

The effects of gendered programming appear in everyday life: girls holding back their opinions even when they know they're right, women second-guessing their decisions, or over-explaining themselves simply because they are women. These small, almost invisible acts of self-restraint are everyday evidence of how deep this programming runs. This conditioning creates an internal hierarchy of rights, where others' comfort is valued above one's own freedom. Women learn to treat rest, choice, and self-expression as privileges, not rights, quietly surrendering their autonomy and dignity.

From afar, it seems like there are two different scripts, one for men and one for women. In her work 'Women, Scripts, and Conditioning', Tara Emmers-Sommer discusses psychologist Byers' idea that "social scripts" shape how people are expected to behave; these are lessons we absorb early through socialisation. For generations, girls have been taught to prioritise others' comfort over their own. As a result, even small choices of basic freedom are treated as acts of rebellious courage. Hence, considered against traditional femininity. This reflects that the gendered programming covertly alters the implications of Legal Human Rights, too, reducing freedoms into permissions that depend on social approval.

At the heart of this process lies guilt. From a young age, girls learn that choosing themselves means disappointing others. This guilt then becomes an inner compass, defining what feels right or wrong and guiding them to put others first. Over time, it turns into self-policing, a quiet rejection of one's own human rights to keep the world around them running smoothly. The freedom they are entitled to by law becomes something they subconsciously deny themselves.

Most legal frameworks address discrimination in access to opportunities, which is valid, but the issue lies in discriminated upbringing that teaches conformity norms and internally clips the courage to ever stand up. As a consequence, women internally reject their potential, even before the world can see it. This is an indirect hit on women's ability to exercise human rights, as they have been socially conditioned to accept the lower ground. Even the simple human right to rest and leisure, guaranteed under Article 24 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, remains out of reach for many homemakers, whose unpaid labour is invisible, unquantified, and unacknowledged.

Recognising this deeper layer, even global frameworks like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) go beyond surface-level equality. Article 5 of the Convention urges nations to address social and cultural patterns that define what men and women "should" be. It calls for transforming these norms by challenging ideas of male superiority and rigid gender roles, while also emphasising shared responsibility in family life. In doing so, it acknowledges that true equality cannot be achieved by policy alone; it must begin with reshaping mindsets and unlearning conformity at home and in society.

The popular Gen Z idea of a "strong, independent woman" comes from this concern. It reflects a woman who no longer silences herself or gives up her dreams just to

keep others comfortable. With the rise in connectivity and global exchange of ideas, things have started to take a different turn. Now, with gender roles becoming less severe, society has started to recognise that the actual basis of sexual division of labour was rooted in inequality, not nature. Women are now proudly stepping into public domains as leaders and are rejecting the benevolent sexism that confines them to only being homemakers and caretakers.

Though the feminist movement is decades old, the road ahead lies in addressing the deeper layers of equality, not just in laws, but in lived experience. Unlearning gendered conditioning begins with awareness. Families, schools, and media must consciously challenge the glorification of self-sacrifice and instead teach girls that prioritising themselves is not selfishness, but self-respect. Emotional literacy and gender sensitivity must be part of early education so that both boys and girls learn empathy without hierarchy.

At a community level, platforms that amplify women's voices - from local dialogues to digital storytelling- can gradually help undo years of silence. Encouraging intergenerational conversations between mothers and daughters about autonomy and choice can also reframe what femininity means. Policy frameworks, too, must evolve beyond access and representation to include psychological empowerment as a human rights goal.

Ultimately, empowering women to recognise and challenge internalised conditioning isn't merely a social reform; it's a human rights imperative. Article 28 of the UDHR states that everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which rights and freedoms can be fully realised. Yet, these external guarantees fall short if internalised beliefs still hold women back. Real freedom demands not just protection from external discrimination, but liberation from the invisible barriers that silence self-belief.

Perhaps the next step toward equality is building a "movement for self-definition": a collective effort that encourages women to reclaim the authorship of their own lives. It calls for redefining womanhood beyond inherited scripts of sacrifice or endurance and recognising autonomy as an everyday practice, not a privilege. This movement does not seek new laws, but new awareness in homes, classrooms, workplaces, and media, where women are supported to think, choose, and exist on their own terms. When women live without guilt, speak without hesitation, and dream without restraint, they embody the true promise of human rights - the freedom to be fully, unapologetically themselves.

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