

## Institutional Constraints on Gender Equality in India: Evidence from SDG 5

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This paper analyzes the institutional barriers influencing gender equality outcomes in India through the lens of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5). Rather than asking whether the right laws and policies exist, it asks why meaningful progress remains elusive despite them, examining three specific SDG 5 targets: discrimination against women, gender-based violence and harmful practices.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** The research employs a theory-based, triangulated institutional analysis and synthesizes findings from around 46 peer-reviewed journal articles and 16 reputable national and international datasets, reports, and books published between 2015 and 2025. Drawing on feminist institutional theory, intersectionality, and feminist political economy as its conceptual anchors, the study brings together academic literature, national survey data, administrative statistics, and institutional reports — reading them alongside one another rather than in isolation — to build a more complete and grounded understanding of how SDG 5 implementation is actually unfolding in India.

**Findings:** The triangulation of evidence indicates that ongoing gender inequality in India is largely fuelled by gendered labour markets, inconsistent enforcement mechanisms, the persistence of deep-rooted societal norms, and limitations in institutional capacity — rather than a lack of legal and policy frameworks, most of which are already in place. The study also finds that divergences between survey-based prevalence estimates and administrative data reflect variation in reporting behaviour and access to institutions, rather than contradictory trends, a distinction that carries significant implications for how such data should be read and acted upon.

**Originality/Value:** The study contributes an institution-centred explanation of SDG 5 implementation in India, shifting the analytical focus away from policy adequacy and toward institutional enforcement, capacity, and accessibility. By reconciling divergent data sources through a triangulated framework, it offers a fresh and practically grounded perspective for researchers, policymakers, and institutions engaged in gender equality monitoring and SDG implementation.

**Paper Type:** Theme Based Paper

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## Introduction

Gender equality occupies a central position in the global development agenda and is explicitly articulated under Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5). Since the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, governments have expanded legal frameworks, policy instruments, and monitoring mechanisms aimed at reducing discrimination, eliminating gender-based violence, and addressing harmful practices affecting women and girls. Although these initiatives have been implemented, advancements in gender equality continue to be inconsistent, underscoring a lasting disparity between official promises and real results (D. Sharma, 2025; Kharkwal & Khan, 2024; Sahni, 2024).

By conceptualizing gender disparity as an institutional process rather than an outcome gap, this article deviates from indicator-driven evaluations of SDG 5. It contends that India offers a particularly illuminating setting for analyzing this divide, drawing on intersectionality, feminist political economy, and feminist institutional theory. The nation has coupled gender-specific laws, constitutional guarantees, and extensive welfare programs with clear alignment to SDG targets over the last ten years (Trivedi, 2018; Arumugam, 2019; Jameel & Ahmed, 2022). However, the persistence of detrimental practice such as child marriage, the persistence of gender-based violence, and the gender gaps in labor force participation show that policy expansion has not resulted in commensurate gains in gender equality (Koley, 2025; M. Sharma et al., 2025; Narsimulu, 2025). Current evaluations mostly use rankings and indicators to record these results, providing little understanding of the institutional processes that perpetuate inequality.

Social conventions, legal systems, and labor markets are all interwoven institutional arrangements that contribute to the persistence of gender disparity. According to this viewpoint, the main obstacle is not the lack of policy but rather the manner in which gendered institutions influence how policies are implemented, enforced, and accessed. Through a theory-informed, triangulated analysis of post-2015 peer-reviewed literature, national statistics, and reputable international publications about SDG 5 in India, the study advances this claim. The paper offers an explanatory view of institutional barriers to gender equality by combining evidence from discrimination, gender-based violence, and harmful practices. The analysis adds to discussions on the institutional constraints of SDG-based gender equality interventions in lower- and middle-income democracies, even if it is empirically based in India.

## Literature Review

### Gender Equality, Institutions, and the SDG Framework

Gender inequality in post-2015 gender and development discourse is increasingly understood as an institutional and

structural issue rather than merely a residual consequence of economic underdevelopment. Although formal commitments to gender equality have been reinforced through the Sustainable Development Goals (Trivedi, 2018; Jameel & Ahmed, 2022), feminist institutional scholars argue that these commitments continue to coexist with deeply embedded institutional structures that shape the implementation and lived experience of policies (Kabeer, 2016; Esquivel, 2016; Razavi, 2016). Such structures include unequal care regimes, gender-segregated labour markets, and governance systems that sustain and reproduce existing power inequalities.

Critical scholarship on the SDGs further suggests that the shift from rights-based approaches to indicator-driven governance risks depoliticizing gender equality by prioritizing measurable outcomes over transformative institutional change (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019). Empirical evidence from the SDG era indicates that improvements in women's education and health have not been accompanied by comparable gains in economic participation or decision-making agency, thereby highlighting the limitations of outcome-based monitoring frameworks (Kabeer & Natali, 2018; Kabeer, 2020; Agarwal, 2020; D. Sharma, 2025; Koley, 2025). Sharma (2025) further demonstrates that, despite substantial policy expansion, persistent structural barriers—including limited access to justice and entrenched patriarchal norms—continue to hinder meaningful progress towards SDG 5 in India. Similarly, Koley (2025) argues that achieving genuine gender equality requires a deeper transformation of the institutional structures governing women's economic and social participation, rather than relying solely on programmatic interventions.

### Intersectionality and Uneven Gender Outcomes in India

This disparity is particularly evident in the Indian context. Despite the introduction of gender-sensitive legislation and social welfare programmes aligned with the SDG framework, female labour force participation in India has remained persistently low (Mehrotra & Parida, 2017; Klasen & Pieters, 2015; Kharkwal & Khan, 2024). Feminist political economy perspectives suggest that this trend cannot be adequately explained by individual choices or deficits in human capital alone. Instead, it reflects deeper institutional constraints, including occupational segregation, the informalization of work, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care responsibilities borne by women (Elson, 2017; Ghosh, 2017). Kharkwal and Khan (2024) further observe that while India has achieved measurable progress on several SDG 5 indicators, particularly in the areas of education and legal reforms, the realization of substantive equality for women and girls continues to be constrained by persistent challenges related to policy enforcement, prevailing social norms, and unequal access to institutional mechanisms.

## India's Unequal Gender Outcomes and Intersectionality

Since 2015, assessments of gender inequality under the SDGs have placed a strong emphasis on intersectionality (M. Sharma et al., 2025). Researchers emphasize that caste, class, geography, and socioeconomic status interact to determine gender outcomes, resulting in distinct types of disadvantage that are frequently hidden by national averages (Kabeer, 2016; Menon, 2015). Feminist political economy interpretations attribute this pattern to institutional constraints such as occupational segregation, informalisation, and unpaid care burdens rather than individual preferences or human capital deficits (Elson, 2017; Ghosh, 2017). Additionally, Sharma, Sharma, and Singh (2025) show that a multidimensional examination of SDG 5 in India indicates stark differences across income classes, caste groupings, and geographies, with marginalized women continuously enduring compounding disadvantages that are often hidden by aggregate national data. Feminist analyses of India highlight how caste-based hierarchies and regional inequalities intersect with gender to structure access to education, employment, and institutional support (Agarwal, 2018; Rao et al., 2019).

India-focused empirical studies demonstrate that women from marginalised caste and economic backgrounds experience compounded disadvantages in labour market participation, asset ownership, and bargaining power within households (Deshpande & Kabeer, 2019; Deshpande, 2022). National survey evidence further reveals substantial inter-state and inter-group variation in women's autonomy and decision-making authority, indicating uneven institutional change across regions (IIPS & ICF, 2021).

Scholars caution that SDG measurement frameworks insufficiently capture these intersectional inequalities, resulting in policy interventions that prioritise aggregate improvement over redistribution and institutional reform (Esquivel, 2016; Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019; NITI Aayog, 2023). The NITI Aayog (2023) SDG India Index further reveals that sub-national variation in SDG 5 performance remains substantial, with several states lagging considerably behind national averages, reflecting the uneven institutional capacity and normative environments that shape gender outcomes across India's federal landscape.

## Gender-Based Violence and Institutional Capacity

Feminist scholarship published after 2015 increasingly conceptualizes gender-based violence not only as an expression of patriarchal power but also as a consequence of institutional failures. Comparative studies demonstrate that intimate partner violence is closely associated with prevailing gender norms, women's economic dependence, and weak enforcement mechanisms, rather than being solely

attributable to cultural exceptionalism (Heise & Kotsadam, 2015; True, 2016).

In the Indian context, peer-reviewed research consistently identifies domestic violence as the most prevalent form of violence experienced by women, despite the existence of various legislative protections (Jewkes et al., 2015; Datta, 2021; Sarkar, 2022). Legal scholars argue that women's access to justice continues to be constrained by institutional barriers, including policing practices, delays within the judicial system, and the inconsistent implementation of protective legislation (Dutta & Kapur, 2020). Furthermore, the triangulation of survey-based and administrative data reveals differing trends in the prevalence and reporting of violence. While data from NFHS-5 indicate a high lifetime prevalence of spousal violence, crime statistics published by the NCRB show a steady rise in reported cases (IIPS & ICF, 2021; NCRB, 2025). Rather than presenting contradictory evidence, scholars interpret these divergent trends as reflecting evolving patterns of reporting behaviour, increased legal awareness, and improved access to institutional mechanisms (Duvvury et al., 2016; WHO, 2023). These patterns highlight the critical role of institutional capacity in shaping progress towards achieving SDG Target 5.2.

## Harmful Practices, Norms, and Legal Limits

Since its explicit inclusion in SDG Target 5.3, greater attention has been directed towards harmful practices, particularly child marriage. Research conducted in the post-2015 period indicates that although child marriage rates in India have gradually declined, significant socioeconomic and regional disparities continue to persist (Raj et al., 2019; Rasmussen et al., 2021). Feminist scholars argue that these patterns cannot be explained simply by the absence of legal restrictions; rather, they emerge from the complex interaction of poverty, entrenched gender norms, and institutional inadequacies (Sen, 2019). Similarly, UNICEF (2023) notes that despite national legal prohibitions, South Asia, including India, continues to record some of the highest rates of child marriage globally. Progress has also remained uneven, with girls from economically disadvantaged households and rural communities continuing to face a disproportionately higher risk.

Legal and normative analyses further suggest that formal prohibitions on harmful practices often coexist with deeply embedded social and institutional structures that continue to regulate women's bodies and life choices (MacKinnon, 2019). Evidence from India demonstrates that, despite broad policy alignment, the effectiveness of legal interventions is frequently shaped by community-level institutions, which can either facilitate or constrain implementation. As a result, these institutional dynamics continue to impede progress towards achieving SDG Target 5.3 (UNICEF, 2023).



## Gender, Work, and Feminist Political Economy

Feminist political economy scholarship provides a critical framework for understanding the persistence of gender inequality within the SDG era. Existing research demonstrates that women's economic participation is systematically constrained by the unequal burden of unpaid care work, fragmented labour markets, and the prevalence of informal forms of employment (Benéría et al., 2016; Ferrant et al., 2016; Elson, 2017). In the Indian context, these challenges are further intensified by prevailing social norms surrounding women's roles within households and the inadequacy of care-related infrastructure (Jayachandran, 2021). The International Labour Organization (2023) similarly identifies the absence of sufficient care leave provisions and publicly funded care services as a major structural barrier to women's sustained participation in the labour force, particularly in societies where unpaid domestic responsibilities continue to be disproportionately borne by women.

Further studies suggest that SDG-oriented initiatives aimed at promoting financial inclusion and entrepreneurship often generate uneven outcomes when underlying structural barriers remain unaddressed (Kabeer & Natali, 2018; Bhattacharya, 2017). Institutional reports reinforce this perspective by emphasizing the importance of labour market reforms and comprehensive care policies in advancing gender equality (World Bank, 2024; OECD, 2021). According to the World Bank (2024), significant disparities continue to exist between women's formal legal rights and their actual access to economic opportunities, despite the introduction of legal reforms in many countries. This indicates that gaps in implementation, along with deeply entrenched institutional norms, continue to sustain gender-based economic exclusion.

## SDG 5 and the Limits of Indicator-Driven Assessment

An increasing body of post-2015 scholarship has criticized the SDG framework for placing greater emphasis on measurement than on explanation. Scholars argue that indicator-driven assessments risk depoliticizing gender inequality by prioritizing measurable outcomes while obscuring the institutional resistance and structural barriers that hinder meaningful change (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Razavi, 2016). In the Indian context, SDG assessments have largely concentrated on programme coverage and performance rankings, often paying insufficient attention to the underlying reasons for uneven progress across different institutional domains (Arumugam, 2019; Sahni, 2024; NITI Aayog, 2023). Narsimulu (2025) contends that achieving gender equality in line with the vision of Viksit Bharat requires systemic transformation that addresses the structural factors perpetuating women's disadvantage across labour, health, and governance institutions, rather than relying predominantly on indicator-based monitoring. Similarly, Sahni (2024) observes that India's performance on SDG 5

reflects an uneven pattern of institutional commitment, wherein progress on a limited number of measurable indicators coexists with persistent shortcomings in more complex and less easily quantifiable dimensions, such as women's agency, safety, and decision-making autonomy.

These critiques underscore the need to interpret SDG data through a theoretically informed lens that incorporates political economy perspectives, normative frameworks, and institutional contexts.

## Synthesis and Emerging Research Gap

Taken together, the post-2015 literature provides substantial empirical evidence on the persistence of gender inequality in India, while also offering strong theoretical explanations for its institutional foundations. However, three important limitations remain evident. First, issues such as discrimination, gender-based violence, and harmful practices are often examined in isolation rather than as interconnected dimensions of gender inequality. Second, much of the SDG-related scholarship remains largely descriptive, prioritizing the measurement of indicators over explaining the underlying processes that sustain inequality. Third, there is a relative scarcity of research that systematically integrates feminist theoretical perspectives with evidence from the SDG era to explain why gender disparities continue to persist.

This review draws upon more than fifty peer-reviewed and institutional sources published since 2015, reflecting a deliberate analytical approach that prioritizes theoretical integration and institutional explanation rather than providing an exhaustive catalogue of existing studies. Addressing the identified gaps requires a theory-informed and triangulated analysis of the institutional barriers that impede progress towards gender equality under SDG 5. This need forms the foundation for the research questions and methodological framework adopted in the present study.

**RQ1:** How do institutional arrangements shape the persistence of gender discrimination against women and girls in India within the framework of SDG 5?

**RQ2:** What institutional and normative factors constrain effective responses to gender-based violence against women in India during the SDG period?

**RQ3:** How do social and institutional norms sustain harmful practices affecting women and girls in India despite legal and policy interventions since 2015?

## Methodology

### Analytical Approach

This study examines gender equality outcomes in India under Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) using a theory-guided, triangulated institutional evaluation. Instead of assessing specific programs or estimating causal impacts,

the approach aims to explain the continuation of gender inequality by fusing feminist theory with empirical data from the SDG era.

Instead of being comprehensive, the review is clearly analytical. Its goal is to pinpoint recurrent institutional processes that influence gender equality outcomes across several SDG 5 targets, such as labor market architecture, enforcement capability, and norm persistence.

## Scope and Evidence Base

The analysis is based on a purposefully created corpus of 62 sources, which includes 16 reputable datasets and reports and 46 peer-reviewed scientific publications. With a temporal cut-off of December 2025, the corpus is limited to the post-2015 SDG timeframe, reflecting the availability of comprehensive and comparable SDG-era evidence at the time of analysis.

Peer-reviewed articles were selected from established journals in gender studies, development economics, and political economy. National datasets and institutional reports — including NFHS-5, NCRB crime statistics, and publications from UN agencies and multilateral organisations were used to contextualise and triangulate scholarly findings rather than as stand-alone evidence.

## Theoretical Anchors

The analysis is guided by three complementary theoretical perspectives:

1. Feminist institutional theory, which looks at how official regulations and unofficial standards influence how gender equality laws are carried out.
2. Intersectionality, which helps explain gender disparities across caste, class, and geography that are hidden by SDG metrics taken as a whole.
3. Feminist political economy, which examines economic marginalization, unpaid caregiving, and labor market participation.

By using these frameworks in an integrative manner, institutional processes can be tracked across SDG 5 targets instead of being studied separately.

## Analytical Strategy and Triangulation

The analysis was conducted through a theory-driven thematic synthesis aligned with SDG Targets 5.1 (discrimination), 5.2 (gender-based violence), and 5.3 (harmful practices). Within each thematic area, findings from peer-reviewed studies were interpreted in light of the selected theoretical frameworks and subsequently cross-validated using survey data, administrative statistics, and institutional reports.

Triangulation was employed as an analytical strategy rather than as a purely mechanical process. Areas of convergence across multiple sources were interpreted as reflecting relatively stable institutional patterns, whereas divergences—such as discrepancies between survey-based estimates of prevalence and officially reported crime statistics—were understood as indicative of variations in reporting practices, access to institutional mechanisms, and the effectiveness of enforcement systems.

## Triangulation Process and Analytical Validation

### Triangulation Logic

This study adopts an explicit analytical triangulation approach to enhance explanatory validity and minimise the limitations associated with relying on a single source of evidence. Rather than treating triangulation as a purely mechanical comparison of datasets, it is conceptualised as an interpretive process through which institutional mechanisms are examined across multiple forms of evidence.

Three forms of triangulation were systematically employed in the study:

1. Source triangulation
2. Theoretical triangulation
3. Interpretive triangulation

Each of these approaches is discussed below.

### Source Triangulation

Source triangulation was achieved through the integration of evidence from three distinct categories:

- Peer-reviewed scholarship (theoretical and empirical studies)
- National survey data (NFHS-5)
- Administrative and institutional reports (NCRB, UN agencies, and multilateral organisations)

Peer-reviewed studies served as the primary source of analytical interpretation regarding gender inequality. National survey data and administrative statistics were used to validate, contextualise, and, where necessary, challenge these interpretations. Institutional reports further assisted in situating the observed patterns within broader governance and policy implementation contexts.

Importantly, no single category of evidence was treated as independently authoritative. Conclusions were drawn only when findings demonstrated convergence across at least two different types of evidence.



## Theoretical Triangulation

The analysis is informed by three complementary theoretical perspectives:

- Feminist institutional theory
- Intersectionality
- Feminist political economy

Rather than employing these frameworks in isolation, they were applied in an integrated manner to interpret each SDG 5 target. For instance, labour market outcomes were analysed simultaneously through the lens of formal and informal institutional arrangements, intersectional social differences, and constraints associated with the care economy. This theoretically integrated approach made it possible to identify mechanisms and relationships that might remain obscured if examined through a single theoretical perspective.

## Interpretive Triangulation

Interpretive triangulation was used to examine both convergences and divergences across different sources of evidence. Findings that converged across multiple datasets—such as the consistently low levels of female labour force participation reported in both scholarly literature and survey data—were interpreted as indicative of enduring institutional constraints.

Conversely, divergent findings, particularly the differences observed between survey-based estimates of gender-based violence and officially reported crime statistics, were not viewed as inconsistencies or methodological weaknesses. Instead, these variations were treated as analytically significant, reflecting differences in reporting behaviour, access to institutional mechanisms, and the capacity of enforcement systems.

By adopting this approach, triangulation functions not merely as a tool for validation but as a means of generating deeper explanatory insights into the institutional dynamics that shape gender inequality.

## Analytical Mapping of Triangulation

To operationalise triangulation, evidence was mapped thematically across SDG 5 targets, as summarised in Table 1.

## Contribution of Triangulation to Validity

By explicitly integrating multiple sources and theoretical perspectives, triangulation enhances the explanatory robustness of the study. It enables the analysis to move beyond descriptive SDG indicators toward an institutional interpretation of why gender inequality persists despite formal commitments.

## Limitations

The study is limited by the amount of SDG-era evidence that is currently accessible and does not use primary data collection because it is an integrative evaluation. Certain forms of gender inequality remain under-documented in national datasets. These limitations do not undermine the explanatory focus of the analysis but indicate directions for future mixed-method research.

## Discussion

This study set out to explain the persistence of gender inequality in India under the SDG 5 framework by examining institutional constraints across discrimination, gender-based violence, and harmful practices. By triangulating feminist theory, peer-reviewed scholarship, national survey data, administrative statistics, and authoritative reports, the analysis reveals consistent institutional mechanisms that operate across domains, despite variation in measured outcomes.

## Discrimination and Institutional Reproduction of Gender Inequality (SDG Target 5.1)

According to the examined literature, gender discrimination in India is an institutionalized problem that is ingrained in homes, governance structures, and labor markets (D. Sharma, 2025; Kharkwal & Khan, 2024). Despite increasing educational attainment, peer-reviewed research shows chronically low female labor force participation and occupational segregation (Mehrotra & Parida, 2017; Deshpande, 2022). Rather than personal preferences, feminist political economy explanations link these patterns to labor market arrangements and unpaid care obligations.

**Table 1. Triangulation Framework Used in the Analysis**

| SDG 5 Target          | Peer-Reviewed Literature             | Survey Data                | Administrative / Institutional Sources | Analytical Insight                   |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 5.1 Discrimination    | Labour market & care-economy studies | NFHS-5 autonomy indicators | World Bank, ILO reports                | Institutionalised economic exclusion |
| 5.2 Violence          | Feminist violence scholarship        | NFHS-5 prevalence          | NCRB, WHO                              | Reporting & enforcement dynamics     |
| 5.3 Harmful practices | Child marriage research              | NFHS-5 age-at-marriage     | UNICEF, UN Women                       | Norm persistence & weak enforcement  |

Triangulation with national survey data supports this interpretation. Formal policy expansion has not consistently changed institutional arrangements governing women's employment, according to NFHS-5 indicators on women's decision-making autonomy and workforce participation, which show significant inter-state and socioeconomic variance (IIPS & ICF, 2021). The tendency is further reinforced by institutional reports that identify structural limitations such as inadequate care infrastructure and gendered employment norms (World Bank, 2024; ILO, 2023). The ILO (2023) further confirms that investing in care leave and care services is a fundamental requirement for facilitating women's equitable and sustained participation in labor markets, especially in situations where women's economic agency is still restricted by informal work arrangements and domestic care responsibilities.

Taken together, convergence across theory, peer-reviewed evidence, and survey data suggests that discrimination persists less due to policy absence than due to institutional configurations that mediate access to economic opportunities. This triangulated evidence supports an institutional explanation of SDG Target 5.1 outcomes.

### **Gender-Based Violence, Reporting Dynamics, and Institutional Capacity (SDG Target 5.2)**

One of the most obvious examples of how triangulation exposes institutional processes that are hidden by single-source research is gender-based violence. Domestic abuse is the most common type of violence against women in India, according to feminist research, which emphasizes the impact of patriarchal norms and lax enforcement measures (Jewkes et al., 2015; Datta, 2021; Sarkar, 2022).

Administrative and survey data, however, show different patterns. While NCRB crime statistics show a consistent increase in reported cases of domestic violence and related offenses, NFHS-5 reports a high lifetime prevalence of spousal violence (IIPS & ICF, 2021; NCRB, 2025). Triangulation shows that this disparity represents differences in reporting behavior, legal awareness, and access to institutions rather than being interpreted as contradictory.

Institutional reports from WHO and UN agencies support this interpretation by documenting how increased reporting may coincide with modest improvements in institutional access without corresponding declines in incidence (WHO, 2023; UN Women, 2023). UN Women (2023) further notes that progress on SDG 5.2 indicators globally has been hampered by persistent gaps in data quality and institutional responsiveness, with many survivors of gender-based violence in lower- and middle-income countries continuing to face significant barriers when seeking legal redress or support services. Thus, triangulation across sources reveals

that observed trends in violence data are shaped as much by institutional capacity and trust as by changes in underlying prevalence. This insight would not be visible through indicator-based SDG assessments alone.

### **Harmful Practices and Norm Persistence (SDG Target 5.3)**

The usefulness of triangulated analysis is further demonstrated by the continuance of detrimental practices, such as child marriage. Peer-reviewed research shows that the prevalence of child marriage has gradually decreased since 2015, but it also highlights ongoing geographical and socioeconomic inequities (Raj et al., 2019; Rasmussen et al., 2021). These results are consistent with NFHS-5 data, which demonstrate disparities in progress between states and social categories (IIPS & ICF, 2021).

By highlighting the interplay between poverty, societal norms, and lax enforcement mechanisms, institutional reports from UNICEF and UN agencies contextualize these developments (UNICEF, 2023). When community-level institutions continue to justify early marriage, legal restriction alone has little effect. This is explained by feminist institutional theory.

Triangulation across scholarship, survey data, and institutional reports thus reveals that norm persistence, rather than lack of policy, remains the primary constraint on achieving SDG Target 5.3. This reinforces the argument that institutional and normative change must accompany legal interventions.

### **Integrative Insights from Triangulation**

Triangulation of the three SDG targets shows a continuous pattern: gender inequality in India continues because of the interaction of gendered institutions that influence implementation, enforcement, and access rather than because there are no clear commitments. While differences between data types emphasizes the significance of institutional context in evaluating SDG indicators, convergence across several evidence sources improves the robustness of this result.

This study shows that indicator-driven evaluations risk of misinterpreting success unless they are placed inside an institutional analytical framework by fusing feminist theory with SDG-era data (Koley, 2025; M. Sharma et al., 2025). The results emphasize the necessity of SDG assessments that go beyond measurement in favor of explanation.

While empirically grounded in India, these institutional dynamics mirror challenges identified in other lower- and middle-income democracies, suggesting broader relevance for SDG 5 implementation beyond the Indian context.



## Conclusion

This study used a theory-guided, triangulated institutional evaluation to investigate the persistence of gender inequality in India under the SDG 5 framework. The analysis, which combines feminist theory with peer-reviewed literature, national survey data, administrative statistics, and institutional reports, shows that institutional arrangements that influence implementation, enforcement, and access are more important in sustaining gender inequality than the lack of policies (D. Sharma, 2025; Kharkwal & Khan, 2024; Sahni, 2024).

Triangulation reveals institutional mechanisms that are constant across domains, including discrimination, gender-based violence, and harmful practices. Women's economic engagement is restricted by gendered labour markets and unpaid care obligations; perceived patterns of violence are shaped by uneven enforcement and reporting dynamics; and the effectiveness of legislative actions addressing harmful behaviour is limited by the persistence of norms. It is demonstrated that differences between data sources are analytically significant, indicating institutional access and capacity rather than contradictions in the evidence.

This work advances gender and development scholarship by redefining SDG 5 as an institutional process rather than an outcome benchmark, going beyond descriptive indicator-based evaluations toward explanation. Although based on the Indian setting, the results show that SDG-aligned gender equality efforts face more general difficulties in lower- and middle-income democracies (Jameel & Ahmed, 2022; Koley, 2025), where formal pledges meet with deeply ingrained institutional restrictions.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

The study's conclusions have a number of ramifications for SDG 5 implementation policy and practice. First, gender equality measures should focus on resolving institutional constraints that mediate policy efficacy rather than just broadening legal and programmatic coverage. Formal pledges are unlikely to result in significant outcomes until labor market institutions, care infrastructure, and enforcement procedures are reformed (Narsimulu, 2025; Trivedi, 2018).

Second, rather than depending only on legislative expansion, responses to gender-based violence should prioritize institutional capacity and access. Differences between reported crime statistics and survey prevalence suggest that ongoing violence may coexist with increases in reporting and institutional trust. Therefore, policy evaluation should differentiate between changes in reporting behavior and changes in incidence (D. Sharma, 2025; Sahni, 2024).

Third, in addition to legal enforcement, attempts to end detrimental practices like child marriage necessitate ongoing collaboration with normative and community-level institutions. Legal prohibition alone is insufficient where economic insecurity and social norms continue to shape behaviour.

Finally, SDG monitoring and evaluation would benefit from greater use of triangulated interpretation rather than reliance on single indicators. The explanatory value of SDG evaluations can be increased and more context-responsive policy formulation can be supported by integrating survey data, administrative statistics, and qualitative institutional insights.

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### Annexure 18.1.3

| Submission Date | Submission Id      | Word Count | Character Count |
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| SIMILARITY %                                                                                | MATCHED SOURCES                                                                       | GRADE    |             |
| A-Satisfactory (0-10%)<br>B-Upgrade (11-40%)<br>C-Poor (41-60%)<br>D-Unacceptable (61-100%) |                                                                                       |          |             |
| LOCATION                                                                                    | MATCHED DOMAIN                                                                        | %        | SOURCE TYPE |
| 2                                                                                           | Self-perceived participation among adults with spinal cord injury a g by Ripat-2012   | <1       | Publication |
| 3                                                                                           | Violence With Femicide Risk Its Effects on Women and Their Children by Hernandez-2018 | <1       | Publication |
| 4                                                                                           | www.tandfonline.com                                                                   | <1       | Publication |
| 5                                                                                           | www.imf.org                                                                           | <1       | Publication |
| 6                                                                                           | theses.hal.science                                                                    | <1       | Publication |

### Reviewers Memorandum



**Reviewer's Comment 1:** This study looks at gender equality in India through the lens of SDG 5, and it does something most reviews in this space don't — it actually tries to explain why progress has stalled instead of just measuring how far it's come. The use of NFHS-5 data alongside NCRB crime records is handled carefully, especially when the two data sources seem to disagree. Rather than treating that disagreement as a flaw, the authors read it as a sign of how reporting and institutional access actually work, which is a more honest way to interpret the numbers. Bringing feminist institutional theory, intersectionality, and feminist political economy together to look at Targets 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3 side by side, instead of one at a time, is where the paper earns its keep.

**Reviewer's Comment 2:** The study stands out here is the decision to treat SDG 5 as an ongoing institutional process rather than a scorecard. The sections on discrimination, violence, and harmful practices are backed by a solid and current set of references, and the intersectional angle — showing how caste, class, and region hide behind national averages — adds real weight to the argument. The three-part triangulation (source, theory, interpretation) is laid out clearly enough that a reader can follow the logic without getting lost. One suggestion can be incorporated that a bit more detail on how the 62 sources were chosen would help readers judge the scope of the review more confidently.

**Reviewer's Comment 3:** The paper is organized well and tackles a question that matters right now. The discussion section makes a convincing case that its institutions are not missing laws that keep gender inequality in place across labour markets, enforcement, and social norms. The policy section is genuinely useful, especially the point about separating rising reports of violence from rising actual incidence; that distinction gets lost in a lot of policy writing. Framing India's case as relevant to other lower- and middle-income democracies also gives the paper a reach beyond just one country.



Nitasha Mittal and Ruchi Gautam  
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**Conflict of Interest:** Author of a Paper  
 had no conflict neither financially nor academically.

**Editorial Excerpt**

The article has 2% plagiarism, which is in the journal's accepted limit for publication. Per the editorial board's observations and the blind reviewers' remarks, the paper needed some minor revisions, which were communicated to the authors (Nitasha and Ruchi) in good time, and the corrections were made as directed. The comments on this manuscript track closely with its theme, "Institutional Constraints on Gender Equality in India: Evidence from SDG 5", both in subject and in research approach. The paper offers a timely and well-triangulated look at why gender inequality in India persists under SDG 5, drawing together feminist institutional theory, intersectionality, and feminist political economy with survey and administrative data to build its case. A few minor points on methodological transparency around source selection were raised, but overall the manuscript is a solid contribution to gender studies, development economics, and policy research, and is recommended for publication with minor revisions. Following the reviews and the editorial board's decision, the manuscript has been placed under the "Theme Based Paper" category for this issue.

**Acknowledgement**

The acknowledgment section is an essential part of all academic research papers. It provides appropriate recognition to all contributors for their hard work and effort taken while writing a paper. The data presented and analyzed in this paper by (Nitasha Mittal and Dr. Ruchi Gautam) were collected first handily and wherever it has been taken the proper acknowledgment and endorsement depicts. The authors are highly indebted to others who facilitated accomplishing the research. Last but not least, endorse all reviewers and editors of GJEIS in publishing in the present issue.

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