



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



Advancing Sustainable Development through Women's Empowerment: A Review of Global and Indian Evidence (2020–2025)

Kritika ^{1,*} and Rajni Pandey ²

¹ Patna University, Patna, Bihar, India.

² Post Graduate Department of Home Science, Patna University, Patna, Bihar, India.

International Journal of Science and Research Archive, 2026, 18(03), 526-532

Publication history: Received on 21 January 2026; revised on 05 March 2026; accepted on 07 March 2026

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/ijrsra.2026.18.3.0481>

Abstract

Women's empowerment is increasingly recognised as a foundational driver of sustainable development, shaping outcomes in poverty reduction, health, education, decent work, climate resilience, and inclusive governance. Marking International Women's Day, this review synthesises evidence from 2020–2025 to examine how empowerment pathways operate globally and within India, and where persistent gaps constrain progress. Using a structured literature selection approach, the review analyses peer-reviewed studies and major development evidence across five empowerment domains: education and skills, economic participation and entrepreneurship, agency and decision-making, political representation, and socio-cultural norms linking each to sustainability outcomes aligned with the SDGs. Across contexts, the literature indicates that empowerment strengthens household welfare and intergenerational gains, expands productivity through labour-market inclusion, improves community-level responsiveness via women's leadership, and enhances environmental stewardship where women have access to resources and a voice in local governance. However, gains remain uneven due to unpaid care burdens, labour-market segmentation, gender-based violence, limited digital and financial inclusion, and intersectional disadvantages affecting rural and marginalised groups. The review argues that sustainable development strategies are most effective when they integrate gender-responsive investments (education, health, care infrastructure, finance, and digital access) with legal protections and accountability mechanisms that convert participation into real decision power. The paper concludes by outlining policy and programmatic priorities for accelerating gender-equal, sustainable development in the next phase of SDG implementation.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment; Sustainable Development; Gender Equality; India; SDGs; International Women's Day

1. Introduction

International Women's Day is both a celebration of progress and a reminder of unfinished work. In recent years, the global development agenda has increasingly framed women's empowerment not as a "sectoral" concern but as a cross-cutting condition for sustained social, economic, and environmental progress. The 2020 to 2025 period is particularly significant because it spans pandemic disruption, recovery policy shifts, and renewed focus on resilience, care work, and inclusive growth issues that have direct gender dimensions.

Women's empowerment is closely aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5, while also shaping progress on poverty, health, education, decent work, inequality, climate action, and strong institutions. Empowerment affects how resources are accessed and allocated within households and communities, how institutions respond to needs, and whether development benefits are widely shared or captured by already-advantaged groups.

* Corresponding author: Kritika

Although the drivers of empowerment show common patterns across countries, outcomes are mediated by social norms, labour-market structures, and governance arrangements. India provides an important lens for examining these dynamics because it combines rapid economic change, large rural and informal sectors, strong policy experimentation (self-help groups, local governance participation), and persistent gender gaps in work participation and safety.

While a large body of work discusses gender equality, fewer reviews integrate recent empirical evidence specifically connecting empowerment pathways to sustainability outcomes across social, economic, and environmental dimensions, especially with an explicit global-India comparison. This review addresses that gap by synthesising literature from 2020 to 2025 to map key empowerment pathways, identify constraints that slow progress, and draw implications for gender-responsive sustainable development.

Accordingly, this review aims to examine how women's empowerment contributes to sustainable development outcomes globally and in India, and to identify the determinants and barriers that shape the translation of empowerment initiatives into measurable development gains.

2. Conceptual Framework

Women's empowerment is best understood as a multidimensional process involving resources (education, assets, finance), agency (decision-making power and voice), and achievements (outcomes in wellbeing and participation). Contemporary scholarship emphasises that empowerment is not merely "participation" but the ability to influence decisions and control benefits, including within households, labour markets, and institutions. Sustainable development requires progress that is socially inclusive, economically resilient, and environmentally responsible. Women's empowerment contributes to these aims by improving human capital and productivity, strengthening household and community resilience, and enhancing collective action in governance and resource management. The relationship is reciprocal: sustainable development investments, especially in education, health, infrastructure, and safety, also enable empowerment by reducing constraints on women's mobility and time.

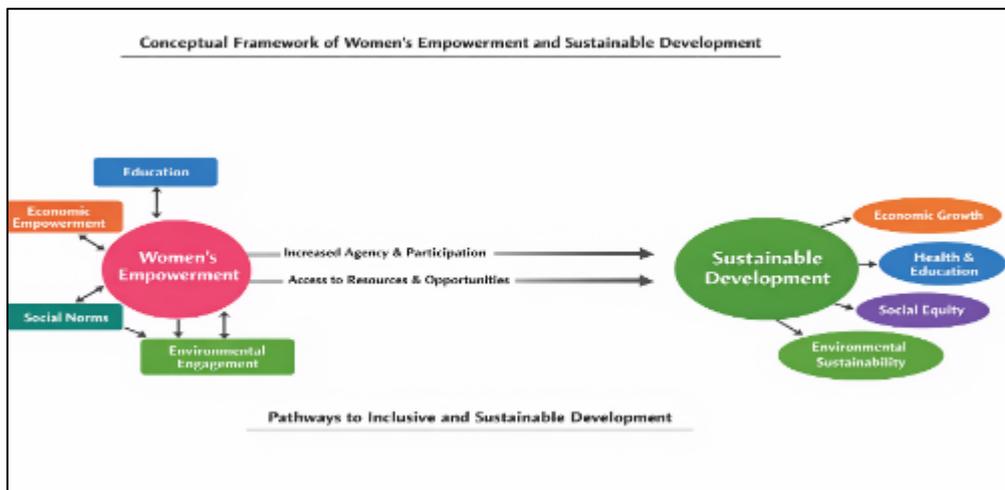


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework Linking Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Development

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual relationship between women's empowerment and sustainable development. The framework highlights how education, economic participation, social norms, and environmental engagement collectively strengthen women's agency and contribute to broader development outcomes.

The conceptual framework used in this review positions women's empowerment domains (education and skills; economic inclusion; agency and voice; political participation; and socio-cultural norms) as pathways influencing sustainable development outcomes (inclusive growth, health and education gains, social equity, and environmental sustainability). Contextual moderators such as care burdens, labour-market structure, digital access, and institutional capacity shape whether empowerment initiatives translate into sustained development impact.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative literature review approach to examine recent scholarly discussions on women's empowerment and sustainable development. The review focuses on research published between 2020 and 2025 to capture contemporary academic perspectives and policy developments related to gender equality and sustainable development. By synthesising recent studies, the review aims to identify the major themes, determinants, and challenges associated with women's empowerment in both global and Indian contexts.

The literature search was conducted using widely accessible academic databases and institutional repositories. Sources were identified through platforms such as Google Scholar, academic journal databases, and reports published by international organisations, including the United Nations, UN Women, UNESCO, and the World Bank. Keywords used during the search included combinations of terms such as "women's empowerment," "gender equality," "sustainable development," "women and development," and "gender and economic participation." These keywords were selected to ensure that the retrieved studies were closely aligned with the central theme of the review.

Only studies published in peer-reviewed journals or recognised institutional reports between 2020 and 2025 were considered for inclusion. The review primarily focused on literature that examined the relationship between women's empowerment and broader development outcomes such as economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. Articles that did not directly address empowerment or development outcomes were excluded to maintain the relevance of the review.

After the initial search process, titles and abstracts of the identified studies were carefully screened to determine their relevance to the research objective. Studies that met the selection criteria were then examined in greater detail through full-text reading. The selected literature was subsequently analysed and organised into thematic categories such as educational empowerment, economic participation, political representation, and social norms influencing gender equality.

The synthesis of the selected studies was carried out through qualitative interpretation rather than statistical aggregation. The synthesis aimed to identify recurring patterns and relationships between women's empowerment and sustainable development outcomes across different geographical contexts. Particular attention was given to studies focusing on India in order to highlight regional experiences and policy initiatives within the broader global discourse.

Through this systematic review process, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how recent research conceptualises women's empowerment and its contribution to sustainable development. The methodological approach enables the integration of diverse scholarly perspectives while maintaining a clear analytical focus on the relationship between gender equality and sustainable development.

4. Literature Review

The major empirical and policy studies examining the relationship between women's empowerment and sustainable development published between 2020 and 2025 are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary of Selected Studies on Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Development (2020–2025)

Author(s)	Year	Country/Region	Focus of Study	Key Findings
UN Women	2020	Global	Gender equality and development outcomes	Women's participation in education and economic activities significantly improves social and economic development indicators.
World Bank	2021	Global	Women's economic participation	Increased access to financial resources and employment opportunities strengthens household welfare and economic resilience.
UNESCO	2021	Global	Education and gender equality	Expanding educational access for girls contributes to long-term improvements in human capital and social development.

OECD	2022	Global	Gender equality in development policy	Integrating gender equality into policy frameworks enhances inclusive and sustainable development outcomes.
Balasubramanian & Anand	2024	Developing countries	Women's economic empowerment	Women's economic participation positively influences national development and poverty reduction.
Hasan & Rahman	2024	Developing countries	Women's participation and development	Women's involvement in social and economic activities promotes community resilience and social stability.
Agarwal	2023	India	Gender and environmental governance	Women's participation in environmental decision-making improves sustainable resource management.
Rahmania et al.	2025	Global	Gender equality and sustainability	Integrating gender perspectives in development strategies strengthens environmental sustainability and social inclusion.

The literature presented in Table 1 indicates that women's empowerment has been widely studied in relation to education, economic participation, governance, and environmental sustainability. These studies collectively highlight that gender equality plays a crucial role in achieving sustainable development outcomes.

5. Results and Discussion

The review of recent literature published between 2020 and 2025 reveals that women's empowerment contributes significantly to multiple dimensions of sustainable development. Across global and Indian contexts, empowerment is linked with improvements in economic participation, social well-being, institutional governance, and environmental management. The analysis indicates that empowerment is not a single outcome but rather a process that emerges through the interaction of educational opportunities, economic inclusion, supportive social norms, and political representation. The findings are discussed below through several key thematic areas.

5.1. Educational Empowerment and Human Development

Education continues to be widely recognised as one of the most fundamental pathways through which women achieve empowerment. The reviewed studies consistently highlight that access to quality education enhances women's capabilities, confidence, and awareness of social rights. Educated women are more likely to participate in economic activities, engage in community decision-making, and support the educational advancement of future generations.

Recent research also suggests that education plays a crucial role in reducing gender-based inequalities within households and communities. When women have access to education and skill development opportunities, they gain greater autonomy in making decisions related to health, employment, and family welfare. This expanded agency contributes to broader development outcomes such as improved child health, better nutritional practices, and increased investment in education.

In the Indian context, initiatives aimed at promoting girls' education have contributed to notable improvements in literacy rates and school enrollment. However, the literature also indicates that disparities persist in higher education participation and technical skill development. Addressing these gaps remains essential for ensuring that educational empowerment translates into long-term economic and social progress.

5.2. Economic Participation and Financial Inclusion

Economic empowerment represents another important dimension of women's empowerment identified in the reviewed studies. Access to employment opportunities, financial resources, and entrepreneurial support allows women to gain greater independence and influence within their households and communities. When women participate actively in economic activities, they contribute not only to household income but also to national productivity and economic resilience.

Recent literature emphasises that financial inclusion plays a critical role in strengthening women's economic participation. Access to banking services, microcredit, and digital financial platforms enables women to manage financial resources, invest in small enterprises, and participate more actively in local markets. These opportunities contribute to poverty reduction and improved livelihood security.

In India, women's self-help groups and microfinance initiatives have been widely recognised as effective mechanisms for promoting financial inclusion. These community-based programs provide women with access to credit, training, and social support networks, enabling them to establish small businesses and improve household economic stability. Nevertheless, the literature also notes that women's labour force participation remains relatively low compared with global averages, indicating the need for stronger policy support and institutional reforms.

5.3. Political Participation and Governance

The review also highlights the growing importance of women's participation in political and governance structures. Increased representation of women in decision-making institutions has been associated with more inclusive policy outcomes and greater attention to social development priorities. Women leaders often prioritise issues such as health services, education, water management, and community welfare.

Evidence from recent studies suggests that political empowerment contributes to more responsive governance by incorporating diverse perspectives into public decision-making processes. Women's participation in local governance institutions can enhance transparency, strengthen community engagement, and improve the delivery of public services.

In India, constitutional provisions reserving seats for women in local government bodies have significantly increased female participation in grassroots governance. These initiatives have provided opportunities for women to influence development programs and advocate for community needs. However, the literature indicates that challenges such as limited resources, social barriers, and inadequate institutional support continue to affect the effectiveness of women's leadership in governance structures.

5.4. Social Norms and Gender Equality

Socio-cultural norms remain one of the most influential factors shaping women's empowerment. The literature consistently demonstrates that gender norms and traditional expectations often limit women's access to education, employment, and leadership opportunities. These norms can influence household decision-making patterns and restrict women's mobility and public participation.

At the same time, recent studies highlight gradual changes in societal attitudes toward gender equality. Increased awareness of women's rights, combined with policy initiatives promoting gender inclusion, has contributed to shifts in social perceptions in many communities. Educational programs, media representation, and community engagement initiatives have also played important roles in challenging traditional stereotypes.

Despite these positive developments, persistent inequalities continue to affect women's opportunities in several regions. Addressing these challenges requires long-term efforts to transform social attitudes and promote gender-sensitive policies that support women's participation in all aspects of social and economic life.

5.5. Women's Role in Environmental Sustainability

Another important finding emerging from recent literature is the growing recognition of women's contributions to environmental sustainability. Women frequently play a central role in managing household resources, agricultural practices, and community environmental initiatives. Their knowledge of local ecosystems and resource management practices can contribute significantly to sustainable development.

Studies indicate that when women are actively involved in environmental decision-making processes, communities often adopt more sustainable resource management strategies. Women's participation in climate adaptation programs, water conservation initiatives, and sustainable agriculture practices has been associated with improved environmental outcomes.

In many rural regions of India, women contribute directly to agricultural production, water management, and energy use within households. Empowering women through access to resources, training, and decision-making opportunities can therefore enhance both environmental sustainability and community resilience.

6. Conclusion

The review highlights that women's empowerment remains a fundamental element in achieving sustainable development across social, economic, and environmental dimensions. Evidence from recent literature published between 2020 and 2025 demonstrates that expanding opportunities for women in education, employment, governance, and community participation can generate significant development benefits. Empowered women contribute not only to improved household welfare but also to broader societal progress through increased economic productivity, enhanced social stability, and responsible management of natural resources.

The findings of this review indicate that education and economic participation are among the most influential factors shaping women's empowerment. Access to education strengthens knowledge, confidence, and decision-making capacity, while financial inclusion and employment opportunities increase women's independence and influence within households and communities. At the same time, women's participation in governance structures has been associated with more inclusive development policies and stronger community engagement in social initiatives.

Despite these positive developments, the literature also reveals persistent structural barriers that continue to limit women's empowerment in many regions. Socio-cultural norms, unequal distribution of unpaid care work, restricted access to financial resources, and gender-based discrimination remain significant challenges. In the Indian context, progress in female education and community participation has been notable, yet disparities in labour force participation and leadership opportunities still require sustained policy attention.

Overall, the synthesis of recent research suggests that women's empowerment should not be viewed only as a goal of gender equality but also as a strategic pathway for achieving sustainable development. Policies that strengthen educational opportunities, promote economic inclusion, support women's leadership, and address structural inequalities can significantly enhance development outcomes. As the global community continues to pursue the Sustainable Development Goals, empowering women will remain essential for building inclusive, resilient, and sustainable societies.

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgments

The authors express sincere gratitude to the academic advisor whose intellectual guidance and constructive suggestions contributed significantly to the preparation of this manuscript. The encouragement and scholarly insights received during the development of this review are gratefully acknowledged.

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research paper. The study was conducted independently, and no external funding agency, institution, or organisation influenced the conceptualisation, analysis, or presentation of the findings reported in this manuscript.

References

- [1] Agarwal, B. (2023). Gender equality and environmental governance for sustainable development. *Environmental Research Letters*, 18(4), 041001. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/acb9a7>
- [2] Balasubramanian, P., & Anand, P. (2024). Does women's economic empowerment promote human development in low- and middle-income countries? *World Development*, 176, 106588. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2024.106588>
- [3] Hasan, M., & Rahman, S. (2024). Women's participation and sustainable development outcomes in developing countries. *Sustainability*, 16(5), 2143. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16052143>
- [4] OECD. (2022). Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls: Guidance for development partners. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/0bddfa8f-en>
- [5] Rahmania, T., Nugroho, R., & Pratama, A. (2025). Integrating gender equality and environmental stewardship for sustainable development. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 11, 101503. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101503>

- [6] UN Women. (2020). Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The gender snapshot 2020. UN Women. <https://www.unwomen.org>
 - [7] UNESCO. (2021). Global education monitoring report 2021: Gender equality and education. UNESCO Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.54676/YXZD6268>
 - [8] World Bank. (2021). *Women, business and the Law 2021*. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1652-9>
-

Appendix

This review examined recent literature published between 2020 and 2025 on women's empowerment and sustainable development. Relevant studies were identified through academic databases and institutional reports. The selection process involved screening titles and abstracts, removing duplicate records, and evaluating full-text articles for relevance. Only peer-reviewed studies addressing key dimensions of women's empowerment and development outcomes were included in the final synthesis.