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Gender Equality & Indian Legal System: An Overview

Dr. Jafar Ali*

Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, G.D. College, Begusarai (Lalit Narayan Mithila University, Darbhanga, Bihar)

*Corresponding Author: jafaralibhu82@gmail.com

Abstract

Gender equality is a fundamental principle of human rights and democratic governance, and the Indian legal system plays a crucial role in promoting gender justice through constitutional guarantees, legislative measures, and judicial interpretations. The Constitution of India provides a strong legal foundation for gender equality through Articles 14, 15, and 16, which ensure equality before the law, prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, and guarantee equal opportunities in public employment. Directive Principles such as Articles 39(d) and 42 further emphasize equal pay for equal work and the protection of women's health and working conditions. This study examines the relationship between gender equality and the Indian legal system by analysing constitutional provisions, major laws, institutional mechanisms, and recent socio-economic indicators related to women's status in India. The research adopts a descriptive and analytical approach based on secondary data collected from government reports, legal documents, academic studies, and official statistics from sources such as the National Crime Records Bureau, the Periodic Labour Force Survey, and the India Justice Report. The findings indicate that although India has developed an extensive legal framework to protect women's rights, significant gender disparities remain in areas such as political representation, labour force participation, and institutional decision-making. Data reveal that women constitute only about 14% of members in the Lok Sabha, approximately 12% of police personnel, and a small proportion of judges in higher courts. Furthermore, more than 4.45 lakh cases of crimes against women were reported in 2022, highlighting persistent challenges in ensuring women's safety and justice. The study concludes that while legal provisions have strengthened the protection of women's rights, effective implementation, institutional reforms, and greater social awareness are necessary to bridge the gap between legal guarantees and the realization of gender equality in India.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Indian Legal System, Women's Rights, Constitutional Provisions, Gender Justice.

Introduction

Gender equality is widely recognized as a fundamental human right and a key element for sustainable social, political, and economic development. In India, the pursuit of gender equality has been strongly influenced by constitutional principles, legislative reforms, and judicial activism. The Indian Constitution establishes a comprehensive legal framework that guarantees equal rights and protection for all citizens regardless of gender. Articles 14, 15, and 16 provide the foundation of equality before the law, prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, and ensure equal opportunities in public employment. In addition, Directive Principles such as Articles 39(d) and 42 emphasize equal pay for equal work and the protection of women's health and working conditions, reflecting the constitutional commitment to gender justice. Despite this strong legal foundation, gender inequality continues to exist in various social, economic, and institutional domains. India has made progress in promoting women's empowerment through policies, education, and legal reforms; however, significant challenges remain in the practical realization of gender equality. Patriarchal norms, socio-cultural barriers, and unequal access to resources often restrict women's participation in decision-making processes and limit their opportunities in many sectors of society. As a result, the gap between legal guarantees and real-life outcomes remains a major concern for policymakers, researchers, and social reformers.

Recent statistical evidence highlights the persistence of gender-related challenges in India. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 445,256 cases of crimes against women were reported in 2022, representing a steady increase compared with previous years and averaging nearly 51 complaints per hour. This indicates that violence and discrimination against women continue to be serious social issues requiring stronger legal enforcement and preventive measures. Additionally, the crime rate against women increased from 58.8 per 100,000 women in 2018 to 66.4 in 2022, reflecting a 12.9% rise over four years. Gender inequality is also visible within the institutions responsible for delivering justice. Women remain underrepresented in the higher judiciary and law-enforcement agencies. The India Justice Report 2025 indicates that women constitute only about 14% of judges in High Courts and around 3% in the Supreme Court, highlighting the gender imbalance in decision-making positions within the legal system. Similarly, women account for a relatively small proportion of the police force and other law-enforcement bodies, limiting gender-sensitive approaches to justice delivery.

Political representation also reflects the continuing gap in gender equality. In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, only 74 women were elected out of 543 Members of Parliament, representing approximately 14% of the total strength, which remains far below the level of parity expected in a democratic society. These figures illustrate that although women constitute nearly half of the country's population, their participation in governance and policy-making remains limited. The Indian legal system has attempted to address these inequalities through various laws and policy initiatives. Legislation such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, and reforms in criminal law have strengthened legal protections for women. Moreover, recent criminal law reforms, including the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (2023), prioritize offences against women and children and introduce stronger provisions for their protection.

Therefore, the Indian legal framework provides significant institutional support for gender equality. However, the effectiveness of these laws largely depends on their implementation, awareness among citizens, and the transformation of deep-rooted social attitudes. In this context, examining the relationship between gender equality and the Indian legal system becomes essential to understand both the achievements and the continuing challenges. This paper provides an overview of the legal provisions, institutional mechanisms, and current trends related to gender equality in India, highlighting the progress made and the areas that require further reform.

Objectives

- To examine the concept and significance of gender equality within the framework of the Indian legal system.
- To analyse the major constitutional provisions, laws, and legal mechanisms established in India for the protection and promotion of gender equality.
- To evaluate the existing challenges and gaps in the implementation of gender equality laws in India using recent data and trends.

Methodology

The present study is based on a descriptive and analytical research design. It primarily relies on secondary sources of data to examine the relationship between gender equality and the Indian legal system. Relevant information has been collected from various sources such as government reports, research articles, academic journals, books, legal documents, and official publications. Statistical data have been obtained from reliable sources including the NCRB, World Economic Forum reports, Ministry of Women and Child Development, and other government databases. The collected data have been carefully reviewed, organized, and analysed to understand the legal provisions, policies, and current status of gender equality in India. This methodology helps provide a comprehensive overview of the legal framework and its effectiveness in promoting gender justice.

Concept of Gender Equality

Gender equality refers to a condition in which individuals of all genders have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities in social, political, economic, and legal spheres. In the Indian context, the concept goes beyond formal equality and focuses on substantive equality, which aims to correct historical discrimination and structural disadvantages faced by women and other marginalized genders. The Indian legal system integrates gender equality through constitutional guarantees, protective legislation, and affirmative policies. The Constitution of India recognizes gender equality as a foundational principle. Articles 14, 15, and 16 ensure equality before the law, prohibit discrimination based on sex, and provide equal opportunities in public employment.

Moreover, Article 15(3) allows the state to make special provisions for women and children, thereby enabling protective and welfare legislation. This provision highlights that the Indian legal framework acknowledges existing inequalities and permits corrective legal interventions. From a legal perspective, gender equality in India is closely connected with social justice and human rights. Courts have interpreted constitutional provisions progressively to expand women's rights in areas such as inheritance, employment, reproductive rights, and

protection from violence. The judiciary has therefore become an important instrument in translating the constitutional vision of equality into practical outcomes. However, legal recognition alone is insufficient unless supported by effective implementation and societal change.

Importance of Gender Equality for Social and Economic Development

Gender equality is not only a legal obligation but also a critical factor in national development. When women receive equal opportunities in education, employment, and decision-making, it contributes to economic growth, improved family welfare, and social stability. In India, increasing female participation in education and the workforce has significantly influenced economic productivity and household well-being. Despite legal protections, gender disparities remain evident in various sectors. Indicators such as labour force participation, political representation, and literacy rates reveal that women still face structural barriers. To understand these disparities, it is important to analyse key gender indicators. Below Table 1 shows selected gender-related indicators in India highlighting the gap between male and female participation in different sectors.

Table 1: Gender Gap in Selected Socio-Economic Indicators in India

Indicator	Male (%)	Female (%)	Year
Literacy Rate	84.7	70.3	2023
Labour Force Participation	76.3	37.0	2024
Representation in Lok Sabha	86.0	14.0	2024
Share in Police Personnel	88.0	12.0	2025

Source: Census Data, Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), Election Commission of India, and India Justice Report (2025).

As presented in above Table 1, selected gender-related indicators in India, highlighting disparities between male and female participation across key socio-economic sectors. The data show that female literacy (70.3%) remains lower than male literacy (84.7%), which influences women's access to education and employment opportunities. Similarly, female labour force participation (37.0%) is significantly lower than that of men (76.3%), reflecting structural challenges such as unpaid care responsibilities, limited employment opportunities, and workplace barriers. Political representation also remains unequal, with women occupying only 14% of seats in the Lok Sabha compared to 86% held by men. In the security sector, women constitute only 12% of police personnel, indicating limited participation in law enforcement institutions. Overall, the table highlights persistent gender gaps in education, employment, governance, and public service sectors in India.

Role of the Legal System in Promoting Gender Equality

The Indian legal system functions as a central mechanism for advancing gender equality. Laws addressing domestic violence, workplace harassment, child marriage, and gender-based discrimination provide institutional support for women's protection and empowerment. Judicial interpretations have further strengthened these protections by expanding the scope of fundamental rights. However, the effectiveness of the legal system depends on enforcement, awareness, and institutional capacity. Limited representation of women in the judiciary and law-enforcement agencies often affects gender-sensitive decision-making. Moreover, delays in the justice system and social stigma associated with reporting crimes can discourage victims from seeking legal remedies.

Constitutional Framework Supporting Gender Equality

The Constitution of India forms the foundational legal structure for ensuring gender equality and protecting women's rights. It adopts a rights-based approach that integrates equality, justice, and dignity into the legal system. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws for all citizens, thereby establishing the fundamental principle of non-discrimination. Article 15(1) prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, while Article 15(3) authorizes the state to make special provisions for women and children. This provision reflects the constitutional recognition that historical inequalities require targeted interventions to achieve substantive equality. In addition, Article 16 ensures equal opportunities in public employment, promoting gender parity in government institutions. The Directive Principles of State Policy also reinforce gender justice. For example, Article 39(a) directs the state to ensure equal rights to livelihood for men and women, while Article 39(d) promotes the principle of equal pay for equal work. Article 42 emphasizes humane working conditions and maternity relief, acknowledging the biological and social realities faced by women in the workforce. Judicial interpretation has significantly expanded these constitutional provisions. Indian courts have often interpreted equality rights broadly to address discrimination and protect women's dignity. Landmark decisions have strengthened women's inheritance rights, workplace protections, and personal autonomy. Thus, the Constitution not only provides legal equality but also encourages the state to adopt proactive measures for gender justice.

Major Legislative Measures Promoting Gender Equality

Alongside constitutional guarantees, the Indian Parliament has enacted several laws to address gender discrimination, violence, and inequality. These legislative measures aim to provide legal protection and promote women's empowerment across different spheres of life. One of the most significant laws is the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, which provides civil remedies and protection orders for women facing domestic abuse. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 addresses workplace harassment and mandates the formation of Internal Complaints Committees in organizations. These laws aim to create safer environments for women both at home and in professional spaces. Additionally, the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, and the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 are important legislative tools that seek to eliminate harmful social practices and support women's health and employment rights. More recently, the introduction of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (2023) has strengthened provisions related to crimes against women, emphasizing stricter penalties and faster investigation procedures. However, the effectiveness of these laws depends largely on implementation. While legislative frameworks are robust, challenges such as limited legal awareness, underreporting of crimes, and procedural delays often reduce their impact. Therefore, legal reforms must be complemented by administrative efficiency and social awareness.

Institutional and Policy Mechanisms for Implementation

To support the enforcement of gender equality laws, India has established several institutional and policy mechanisms. The National Commission for Women (NCW) and various State Commissions for Women play an important role in addressing grievances, monitoring the implementation of laws, and recommending policy reforms. These institutions act as watchdog

bodies that advocate for women's rights and highlight systemic gaps in governance. The government has also launched multiple schemes aimed at improving women's social and economic status. Programs such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Mahila Shakti Kendra, and One Stop Centres provide support services, legal assistance, and awareness programs for women facing violence or discrimination. These initiatives aim to strengthen the connection between legal provisions and grassroots implementation. Furthermore, the reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has significantly increased women's participation in local governance. This policy has enabled millions of women to participate in decision-making processes, thereby strengthening democratic representation and promoting gender-sensitive policies at the grassroots level. Despite these institutional efforts, challenges remain in achieving effective coordination between legal frameworks, administrative bodies, and social institutions. Strengthening gender-sensitive policing, improving access to legal aid, and enhancing institutional accountability are essential steps for ensuring that constitutional and legislative provisions translate into real empowerment for women.

Socio-Cultural Barriers and Structural Inequality

Although India has a strong constitutional and legal framework promoting gender equality, the implementation of these laws is often hindered by deeply rooted socio-cultural norms. Patriarchal attitudes continue to shape social behaviour, family structures, and institutional practices. In many parts of India, traditional beliefs still prioritize male authority and limit women's participation in education, employment, and decision-making. These social norms reduce the effectiveness of legal provisions designed to promote equality. Another major challenge is the lack of awareness about legal rights among women, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged communities. Many women are unaware of laws related to domestic violence, workplace harassment, or inheritance rights. As a result, they may not report abuse or discrimination, allowing violations to persist. In addition, social stigma, fear of retaliation, and economic dependence often discourage victims from seeking legal remedies. Structural inequalities also play a significant role. Women frequently face limited access to financial resources, education, and property ownership. These economic disadvantages reduce their ability to access legal assistance or pursue justice. Therefore, the gap between legal rights and practical empowerment remains a major obstacle in achieving gender equality in India.

Institutional and Legal System Limitations

Another important challenge in implementing gender equality laws lies within the institutional structure of the legal and justice system. Despite various legal reforms, the judicial process in India often suffers from delays, procedural complexity, and limited gender-sensitive infrastructure. Cases related to crimes against women may take years to reach final judgment, reducing the deterrent effect of the law and discouraging victims from pursuing legal action. Furthermore, the underrepresentation of women within law-enforcement agencies and the judiciary can influence the effectiveness of gender-sensitive justice delivery. Women's presence in these institutions is essential for ensuring empathetic handling of cases involving gender-based violence and discrimination. However, their representation remains relatively low in many sectors of the justice system. Police infrastructure and training also require improvement. Although several states have introduced women's help desks and special units

for crimes against women, these initiatives are not uniformly implemented across the country. Limited resources, inadequate training, and heavy workloads often restrict the ability of law-enforcement agencies to respond effectively to gender-based crimes.

Evidence of Implementation Gaps in Gender Justice

Empirical data further highlight the challenges associated with enforcing gender equality laws in India. Crime statistics, representation levels, and labour participation indicators demonstrate that gender disparities remain significant despite the presence of protective legislation. Below Table 2 shows selected indicators related to gender justice and representation in India.

Table 2: Selected Gender Justice Indicators in India

Indicator	Data	Year
Total cases of crimes against women	445,256	2022
Female representation in Lok Sabha	74 out of 543 MPs (14%)	2024
Women in police personnel	Approximately 12%	2025
Female labour force participation rate	Around 37%	2024

Source: NCRB, ECI, Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), India Justice Report (2025).

As presented in above Table 2, the data reveal several gaps in the practical realization of gender equality. The large number of reported crimes against women indicates that legal protection has not fully prevented gender-based violence. Although increased reporting may partly reflect greater awareness, the persistent scale of these crimes highlights the need for stronger preventive mechanisms and faster judicial processes. Similarly, the low representation of women in Parliament demonstrates that political decision-making structures still lack gender balance. Limited participation in governance restricts women's ability to influence policies that directly affect their rights and welfare. The relatively small proportion of women in police forces further weakens gender-sensitive law enforcement, particularly in cases involving sexual harassment or domestic violence.

Therefore, while India has established an extensive legal framework supporting gender equality, the data indicate that implementation gaps remain significant. Addressing these challenges requires stronger institutional capacity, increased representation of women in decision-making bodies, improved legal awareness, and more efficient justice delivery systems. Only through coordinated efforts at legal, institutional, and societal levels can the vision of gender equality embed in the Indian legal system be fully realized.

Result and Discussion

The analysis of secondary data and legal provisions indicates that the Indian legal system has developed a strong constitutional and legislative framework to promote gender equality, yet significant gaps remain between legal provisions and their practical implementation. The study reveals that constitutional guarantees under Articles 14, 15, and 16 provide a solid foundation for equality before the law and protection against gender-based discrimination. In addition, several legislative measures such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013) demonstrate the government's commitment to addressing gender injustice. Judicial interpretations and policy initiatives have also expanded the scope of women's rights in areas such as workplace safety, property rights, and protection from violence. These developments

indicate that the Indian legal framework plays an important role in promoting gender justice and empowering women.

However, the results also highlight several structural and institutional challenges that limit the effectiveness of these legal mechanisms. Statistical data show that crimes against women remain a serious concern, with over 4.45 lakh cases reported in 2022 according to the National Crime Records Bureau. This suggests that despite the existence of protective legislation, gender-based violence continues to persist. Similarly, women's representation in political and administrative institutions remains relatively low. For instance, women constitute only around 14% of members in the Lok Sabha and approximately 12% of police personnel, indicating limited participation in decision-making and law enforcement processes. Such disparities weaken the implementation of gender-sensitive policies and justice delivery mechanisms. The discussion further reveals that socio-cultural barriers, lack of awareness, and economic dependency play a crucial role in restricting women's access to justice. Patriarchal social norms often discourage women from reporting crimes or seeking legal remedies. In addition, delays in judicial processes and inadequate institutional support sometimes reduce the effectiveness of legal protections. These issues highlight that gender equality cannot be achieved solely through legislation; it requires comprehensive social, institutional, and policy reforms.

Overall, the findings suggest that while India has made considerable progress in establishing legal safeguards for gender equality, effective implementation, stronger institutional capacity, and greater public awareness are essential for translating legal rights into real empowerment. Strengthening gender-sensitive governance and increasing women's participation in decision-making bodies will be key to achieving sustainable gender justice in India.

Conclusion

The Indian legal system provides a strong constitutional and legislative framework for promoting gender equality and protecting women's rights. Provisions in the Constitution and various laws addressing domestic violence, workplace harassment, and gender discrimination demonstrate the state's commitment to gender justice. However, despite these legal safeguards, significant disparities continue in areas such as political representation, employment, and participation in the justice system. Data on crimes against women and the low representation of women in Parliament, the judiciary, and police forces highlight the gap between legal guarantees and practical outcomes. Therefore, achieving meaningful gender equality requires effective implementation of laws, institutional reforms, increased legal awareness, and greater participation of women in governance and decision-making. Addressing socio-cultural barriers and strengthening gender-sensitive policies will be essential to ensure that the legal system contributes effectively to sustainable gender justice in India.

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