



Gender Mainstreaming in Public Policy: Successes and Shortcomings in India

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Abstract:

Gender mainstreaming is a critical strategy for integrating gender perspectives into public policy to achieve gender equality. India has made significant progress in this area through constitutional mandates, policy frameworks, and international commitments such as the Beijing Declaration and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5). Key initiatives, including Gender Budgeting, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP), and the National Policy for Women (2016), have contributed to advancements in education, employment, health, and political representation. However, persistent socio-cultural norms, weak institutional implementation, and economic barriers continue to hinder gender equality. This study examines the successes and shortcomings of gender mainstreaming in Indian public policy, exploring its effectiveness, key policies, implementation challenges, and governance gaps. A comparative analysis with global best practices highlights lessons that India can adopt to enhance gender-responsive policymaking. The paper concludes with policy recommendations, emphasizing institutional accountability, socio-cultural transformation, economic empowerment, and enhanced political representation. Addressing these challenges through a holistic, impact-driven approach can ensure that gender equality is effectively mainstreamed into India's governance and development agenda.

Keywords: Gender Mainstreaming, Public Policy, Gender Equality, India, Gender Budgeting, Women Empowerment, Political Representation, Economic Participation, Gender-Based Violence, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Introduction:

Background & Significance:

Gender mainstreaming refers to the process of assessing the implications of any planned action—legislation, policies, or programs—on both women and men in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making gender concerns and experiences an integral dimension of policy design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation to achieve gender equality.

In India, gender inequality remains a significant challenge despite constitutional guarantees and various policy interventions. Public policies have aimed to bridge the gender gap in education, employment, health, and political participation. However, deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, socio-economic disparities, and ineffective implementation often hinder the success of these policies.

India's commitment to gender equality is reflected in its constitutional provisions (e.g., Articles 14, 15, 39, and 42), international commitments (e.g., the Beijing Declaration, SDG 5—Gender Equality), and national policies such as **Gender Budgeting, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP), and the National Policy for Women (2016)**. Despite these efforts, issues such as gender wage gaps, underrepresentation of women in leadership, and high rates of gender-based violence persist.

Objectives of the Study:

This research paper aims to:

1. Analyse the progress made in gender mainstreaming within India's public policies.
2. Identify key achievements and policy measures that have positively impacted gender equality.
3. Examine the shortcomings and challenges in implementation and effectiveness.
4. Provide recommendations for improving gender-responsive governance and policy frameworks.

Research Questions:

The study will address the following research questions:

1. **Effectiveness:** How effective has gender mainstreaming been in Indian public policy?
2. **Key Policies:** What are the major policies and programs designed to promote gender equality in India?
3. **Implementation Challenges:** What are the major shortcomings in the execution of gender-sensitive policies?
4. **Gaps in Governance:** What are the structural and socio-cultural barriers that hinder gender mainstreaming?
5. **Future Roadmap:** What strategies can strengthen gender-sensitive policymaking in India?

Theoretical Framework:

To understand gender mainstreaming in public policy, it is essential to analyse it through relevant theoretical perspectives. One such perspective is the **Feminist Policy Analysis Approach**, which examines how public policies impact different genders and whether they reinforce or challenge gender inequalities. This approach identifies gender biases in policy design and implementation, ensuring that policies promote gender equity rather than just formal equality. It also highlights the institutional and social barriers that hinder effective gender mainstreaming. Another relevant perspective is the **Gender and Development (GAD) Approach**, which moves beyond women-specific policies and focuses on gender relations, power dynamics, and structural inequalities. This approach examines how economic, social, and political factors shape gender disparities while advocating for transformative policies such as gender-responsive budgeting and inclusive policymaking. Additionally, the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Gender Equality Framework** provide an international benchmark for assessing India's progress in gender mainstreaming. SDG 5 (Gender Equality) is particularly relevant, along with SDGs 3 (Good Health and Well-being), 4 (Quality Education), and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). India's gender policies are often evaluated in light of these global targets to assess their alignment with international commitments to gender equality.

Review of Literature:

A comprehensive review of previous studies helps identify patterns, successes, and challenges in gender mainstreaming efforts in India. From a global perspective, studies highlight how Nordic countries such as Sweden, Norway, and Finland have successfully integrated gender-sensitive policies in education, labor markets, and governance. The European Union's emphasis on gender-responsive budgeting and institutional mechanisms serves as a model for effective

policy implementation. However, many developing countries face persistent structural barriers such as poverty, illiteracy, and cultural resistance, which hinder policy effectiveness. These global experiences provide valuable lessons that can be adapted to the Indian context.

In India, research on gender mainstreaming policies presents mixed outcomes. Successes include increased political representation of women at the **Panchayati Raj level**, where a **33% reservation for women** has enabled greater participation in local governance. The introduction of **Gender Budgeting in 2005-06** has improved financial allocation for women-focused programs, while initiatives such as **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)** have led to enhanced awareness about girls' education. However, significant shortcomings remain. Many policies lack effective implementation and accountability mechanisms, leading to gaps between policy design and actual impact. Gender budgeting, while an important tool, is still limited to a few ministries, and fund allocation is not always targeted efficiently. Moreover, despite economic empowerment schemes, women's workforce participation remains low, pointing to structural and cultural constraints that hinder economic inclusion.

Sectoral studies on gender mainstreaming in India reveal additional challenges. In the education sector, policies like Kanya Shiksha and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao have improved girls' enrolment rates, but dropout rates remain high due to early marriage and social norms. In the health sector, gender-focused initiatives have contributed to a reduction in maternal mortality rates; however, disparities in nutrition and access to mental healthcare persist. Economic studies highlight occupational segregation, wage disparity, and low female labor force participation, underscoring the need for stronger policy interventions. Political representation of women has increased at the grassroots level through Panchayati Raj institutions, but their presence in higher legislative bodies remains minimal due to entrenched patriarchal norms. Scholars critique India's gender mainstreaming efforts for being predominantly policy-driven rather than impact-driven. Policies often exist in isolation and lack integration with broader governance frameworks. Additionally, the absence of disaggregated gender data makes it difficult to assess policy effectiveness comprehensively.

Research Gaps:

This literature review highlights several research gaps. Firstly, existing policies tend to overlook intersectionality, failing to consider how caste, class, and rural-urban divides impact gender inequality. Secondly, policy execution often lacks accountability, as many initiatives are well-designed on paper but do not translate into effective implementation. Lastly, empirical research on district-level and grassroots gender policy effectiveness remains limited, indicating a need for more localized and data-driven studies.

Gender Mainstreaming in Indian Public Policy: An Overview:

Gender mainstreaming in India has evolved through constitutional mandates, policy frameworks, international commitments, and grassroots movements. Over the years, several policies and initiatives have been introduced to integrate gender perspectives into governance and development. The National Policy for Women (2016) serves as a comprehensive framework to improve women's economic and social status. It focuses on health, education, employment, decision-making, and violence prevention, while also calling for gender-responsive budgeting and institutional support for implementation. However, despite its ambitious framework, execution challenges persist.

A critical financial tool in this effort is **Gender Budgeting**, introduced in **2005-06**, which aims to ensure that government expenditures effectively address gender disparities. Ministries are

encouraged to allocate a portion of their budgets to gender-inclusive programs. While this approach has led to better financial planning for women-centric schemes, its implementation remains inconsistent across different sectors. Similarly, flagship programs such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) were launched to counter the declining child sex ratio and promote girls' education. While awareness campaigns have been successful, a significant portion of the allocated funds has been spent on publicity rather than direct beneficiary programs.

In terms of political representation, India has seen progress through women's reservation in governance. The 33% reservation in Panchayati Raj institutions has notably increased women's participation at the local level, yet their presence in Parliament and State Assemblies remains limited. The Women's Reservation Bill (2023), which proposes 33% reservation in Parliament and State Assemblies, marks a significant step forward, but its implementation has been slow. Workplace rights have also been addressed through the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017, which increased paid maternity leave from 12 to 26 weeks and mandated childcare facilities for larger organizations. However, this policy primarily benefits women in the formal sector, leaving out the 90% of Indian women employed in informal work.

Legal frameworks such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 have strengthened legal protections against gender-based violence. However, social stigma and underreporting of cases continue to pose challenges. Despite legal safeguards, implementation gaps hinder the full realization of women's rights.

Sector-Wise Gender Mainstreaming in India:

Gender mainstreaming has been emphasized across multiple sectors with varying degrees of success. In the education sector, initiatives such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) have contributed to improving female literacy rates and closing the Gender Parity Index (GPI) gap in schools. However, high dropout rates among adolescent girls remain a concern, often driven by factors such as early marriage, safety concerns, and menstruation-related issues. In the health sector, programs like Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) and Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) have improved maternal health indicators, but gaps persist in postnatal care, reproductive health services, and mental healthcare access for women. Economic empowerment initiatives such as Self-Help Groups (SHGs) under the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana (DAY-NRLM) have played a significant role in promoting rural women's entrepreneurship. However, women's labor force participation remains low, primarily due to unpaid care responsibilities, wage disparities, and lack of safe work environments. In the political domain, while women's engagement in local governance has increased, their role in national politics remains constrained by male-dominated party structures and the prevalence of proxy candidates—where elected women representatives are controlled by male relatives.

Shortcomings and Challenges in Gender Mainstreaming in India:

Despite numerous policy initiatives, gender mainstreaming in India continues to face significant challenges, which can be broadly categorized into structural, socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers. A critical issue is the lack of reliable and updated gender-disaggregated data, making it difficult to assess the effectiveness of policies. Many government reports fail to incorporate an intersectional perspective, ignoring how caste, class, and regional disparities affect gender inequality. Weak institutional implementation further hampers progress, as policies are often announced without adequate execution mechanisms. Although gender budgeting was introduced to ensure financial allocations for gender equity, its integration across ministries

remains inconsistent, and coordination gaps between central and state governments lead to uneven policy enforcement.

Deep-rooted patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles continue to pose socio-cultural challenges. Women face restricted access to education, employment, and decision-making due to longstanding biases. Social customs like child marriage, the dowry system, and a preference for male heirs persist, undermining gender equality efforts. Gender-based violence (GBV) remains widespread despite legal protections, with domestic violence, honor killings, and sexual harassment still prevalent. Underreporting of such crimes due to fear of social stigma and ineffective law enforcement further exacerbates the problem.

Economic barriers also hinder gender mainstreaming, with India's female labor force participation rate (FLFPR) witnessing a decline from approximately 30% in 1990 to around 25% in 2023. Women continue to bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, such as childcare and household duties, limiting their engagement in formal employment. Additionally, gender wage gaps and occupational segregation persist, with women earning 20-30% less than men and being concentrated in low-paying, informal sector jobs that offer little social security.

Political and legal challenges further impede progress. Women's representation in governance remains inadequate, with less than 15% of parliamentary seats occupied by women. While reservations at the Panchayati Raj level have increased female participation, many women serve as proxy candidates for male relatives, undermining genuine political empowerment. Loopholes in legal frameworks also weaken gender policies; for example, the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) Act (2013) lacks proper enforcement in informal and rural workspaces, while domestic violence cases suffer from delays and low conviction rates. These challenges highlight that India's approach to gender mainstreaming remains largely policy-driven rather than impact-driven, as weak implementation, socio-cultural resistance, and economic constraints limit tangible progress.

Comparative Analysis with Other Countries:

Examining successful gender mainstreaming models from other nations provides valuable insights that India can adapt to enhance its gender policies. The Nordic countries—Sweden, Norway, and Finland—stand out for their strong political commitment to gender equality. Their success is attributed to gender quotas that ensure women's representation in governance, comprehensive parental leave policies that encourage female workforce participation, and mandatory gender-responsive budgeting across all government ministries. Key lessons for India from these nations include institutionalizing gender-responsive policies at all governance levels and implementing stringent equal pay laws with strict enforcement of workplace rights.

Rwanda has emerged as a global leader in gender inclusion, boasting the highest percentage of women in Parliament (~61%) due to the implementation of gender quotas. The country has also prioritized women's economic empowerment through entrepreneurship programs and established gender-sensitive judicial and law enforcement mechanisms. India could benefit from enforcing stronger political reservations for women in higher governance roles and expanding legal literacy programs to help women assert their rights.

Germany presents another compelling model, particularly in workforce inclusion and social policies. The country's Equal Pay Act ensures transparency in wage structures, while state-funded childcare services help women balance work and family responsibilities. India could replicate these policies by improving childcare infrastructure to support working mothers and introducing workplace flexibility measures to retain women in employment. A comparative

analysis underscores the importance of strong institutional accountability, legal enforcement, and cultural shifts in achieving effective gender mainstreaming.

Policy Recommendations and the Way Forward:

To overcome existing challenges and enhance gender mainstreaming efforts, several policy recommendations must be considered. Strengthening institutional mechanisms is crucial, beginning with the mandatory implementation of gender budgeting across all government ministries. Gender-sensitive budgeting should be made a compulsory requirement, with improved monitoring and impact assessment mechanisms to track gender-related outcomes. Establishing a National Gender Mainstreaming Authority would ensure better coordination of gender policies, compliance with existing frameworks, and regular gender audits to assess progress.

Addressing socio-cultural barriers is equally important. Community-based gender awareness programs should be expanded to engage local leaders, NGOs, and educational institutions in gender sensitization initiatives. Integrating gender equality topics into school curricula would help instill progressive attitudes from an early age. Additionally, stronger enforcement of anti-GBV laws is necessary, with the establishment of more fast-track courts for gender-based violence cases and specialized training for law enforcement personnel to handle such crimes sensitively.

Enhancing women's economic empowerment should be a top priority. Policies must promote access to formal employment by encouraging flexible work arrangements, remote work opportunities, and paid parental leave. Providing tax incentives to companies that ensure gender-equal hiring and promotions would further support workplace inclusion. Expanding financial inclusion for women through targeted credit schemes, microfinance initiatives, and the promotion of self-help groups (SHGs) can enhance economic independence for women, especially in rural areas.

Political representation must also be strengthened. The immediate implementation of the Women's Reservation Bill (2023), which guarantees 33% reservation for women in Parliament and State Assemblies, is crucial. Additionally, leadership and capacity-building programs should be introduced to train women in policy-making, governance, and political participation, ensuring that female leaders are equipped with the necessary skills to effect meaningful change.

Finally, improving data collection and research on gender equality is essential for evidence-based policymaking. A National Gender Data Repository should be developed to collect real-time, gender-disaggregated data, enabling policymakers to design targeted interventions. Collaborations with universities, research institutions, and international organizations should be encouraged to conduct empirical studies on gender policy effectiveness. Expanding research in areas such as intersectionality, rural gender dynamics, and sector-specific gender policies will help bridge existing knowledge gaps and drive more impactful policymaking.

By implementing these recommendations, India can move beyond a policy-driven approach to a truly impact-driven gender mainstreaming strategy, ensuring that gender equality is embedded across all sectors of governance, economy, and society.

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