

Feminine Leadership in Contemporary India: “Deconstructing Cultural Resistance and Reclaiming Relational Authority in India”

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Abstract

Women in leadership roles continue to meet resistance from culture and social institutions in India, despite constitutional and eighty years of legislative protection. In a socio-cultural environment that equates authority with traditional traits of masculinity, qualities of femininity in leadership like empathy, collaboration, consensus-building, emotional wisdom, and long-term ethics are at cross-purposes. The article explores why the double bind paradox, the likability penalty, the maternal wall, caste-gender intersections, religious orthodoxy, safety constraints, and sustained "Bindi Ceiling" in corporate, political, educational, and community spheres continue to silently grapple with as evidence from empirical studies, policy reports, and lived realities up to 2025. To India, neatly visualizing the vision of holistic, inclusive education in NEP 2020 and the Sustainable Development Goals, the episodes narrated in this paper make a useful argument about the necessity of throwing away these obstacles.

Keywords: Cultural & social restraint for women, decision making, feminine leadership, gender gap

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Introduction:

The Continuing Paradox of Power and Gender in India

Truly, it has always been a country represented as a land of infinite power with words that imply that it has been replete with females capable of ruling over it. In Vedic India, Gargi and Maitreyi debated philosophical matters with Yajnavalkya, among many men, with women still largely oppressed in society, but the likes of Queen Rudrama Devi of the thirteenth century, who wore armour and governed, or the warrior freedom fighters of bhakti, Andal and Meerabai, dealt with millions through devotional poetry. There arose the twentieth century women, such as Indira Gandhi (politician), Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw (entrepreneur/executive), Aruna

Roy (social activist), Medha Patkar (activist/feminist), and sports icon Mary Kom, as

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de facto leaders in the land. In 2025, though, leadership in practice is entirely different.

A petty 4.2% of Fortune India 500 companies are documented to be headed by women CEOs in 2024–25, which saw a fall from an already poor 5.1% in 2021. Only 18 percent of the current Lok Sabha (2024) seats are filled by women; 12 percent of vice-chancellors in Indian universities are without question male, as per AISHE 2023–24. 32 percent of the new IAS recruits are women, whereas only 11 percent of Secretaries to the Government of India are women, and we continue

to bask in that dubious distinction. In the armed forces, women officers have crossed the intake ceiling of 13 percent, but none has attained the rank of three-star. In this domain, the docket almost began to be corrected by the historic phenomenon of three sitting women judges on the Supreme Court bench as at November 2025, which is yet a figuring of around 12 % women in the High Court benches.

Women who lead today have a continuing challenge in that the three traits recognized as hallmarks of good leadership – empathy, inclusivity and ethics – are often seen as "weak": Conversely, when women leaders exert assertiveness, they are often labelled as "aggressive" or "not feminine". This is a classic double bind that is continuously reinforced by India's corporates, their governments, the judicial system and the educational system, which reward compliance with masculine standards over the competence of a person leading an organization. Furthermore, although legal advances, such as equitable inheritance rights, maternity leave, and political quotas for women have all been made, in societal attitudes, authority is still synonymous with manliness. This chapter, through the use of current research, policy studies and the use of seven different types of organization, will demonstrate the marginalization of women-like leadership in favor of hyper-masculine forms of leadership (regardless of the evidence highlighting the benefits of women-leadership styles in terms of sustainability, trust, innovation and resiliency of an organization). The question that India will have to face in 2025 is not will women leaders be capable of leading, but rather whether or not they will have the permission to lead?

Review of Literature: Mapping the Global-to-Local Continuum of Feminine Leadership Research

The examination of female leadership and its

hurdles is supported by a strong and ever-growing scholarly work of various disciplines like psychology, management, sociology, feminist studies, political science, and intersectional caste-gender frameworks.

Foundational Global Scholarship

Catalyst (2007, now updated to 2023) primarily developed the "double-bind" concept based on the results of big surveys involving Fortune 500 companies. Eagly & Carli's *Through the Labyrinth* (2007) and their meta-analyses (Eagly & Heilman, 2016; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2024 update) continue to be the most cited works indicating that women are subject to harsher judgments than men for identical agentic or communal behaviours. Rudman et al.'s studies on "backlash effect" and "likability penalty" (2012, 2021) highlight that self-promoting or dominant women get to face both social and economic penalties. Ryan & Haslam's "glass cliff" theory (2005, 2023 longitudinal update) indicates that women are mostly placed in such unstable leadership positions during organizational crises—this is now corroborated by data from 18 countries, including India.

Indian-Specific Empirical and Qualitative Studies

Women in leadership positions face many challenges in India due to structural barriers according to empirical research. The corporate world is often resistant to women and continues to have a very low percentage of women on boards (18–19%) and in senior management positions. In addition, women are often unfairly penalised for being mothers and can face significant performance bias as a result of it. The concept of the "maternal wall" shows that women receive less help when they return from maternity leave; however, there are many new initiatives designed to improve the experience of women in the workplace. The research shows that women need access to women

leaders in organisations to succeed; unfortunately, many women do not have a proper mentor and there is a lack of women in senior leadership positions. The research also indicates that women from multiple backgrounds such as Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi, Muslim and North-East Indian women have to overcome even more obstacles in order to attain leadership positions; therefore, it is clear that there is a need for women leaders to create Phule-Ambedkarite-feminist leadership.

Political Leadership Studies

While 33–50% of panchayat positions have been reserved for women, the share of positions reserved for women in the asymmetrically gendered body positions has rapidly increased since 1992, as is demonstrated by a spate of identification with the development of men's consent, domination, patronage, and minor power circles by the enabled passage of empowered women leaders. A truncated record includes 33%-50% for women leaders all positions in panchayats; people from this space are sold on procedural decline in utilized figures since 1992, promising a legal word/my own; patriarchy is undoubtedly strict premeditated toleration, shall crumble by association of a team of men with benevolent leaders. Whatsoever has been seen so far from the present tends to make sense as it has its limits and connotations. Rai and Spary, 2019, Basu, 2023; and Chhibber and Jassal, 2024, every one of themselves sharing this bestowal, takes us into the typical dictionary terms talking about the empowered women's tyranny, sociological rule over the females, including the widely missed possibility of making some bitter correlations. Then Rai and Spary, Basu, and Chhibber and Jassal occupy this forte; not accusing but-in practical intellectual terms-emancipating women in no uncertain terminology, have been speaking earlier in another article. Basu, et al., are fantastic in arguing up-against rabid forces with nightmarish gender lines collapsing in India. Only they are targeted again as Muslim and Dalit MPs receiving

the most appalling abuses one can ever find. Rai and Spary hold their ground at such junctures in legally deprived workers, even erasing talk of any critical concept of women's empowerment in collective political life. Mayawati, Mamata, and Jayalalithaa in the equation of choice set up against each other by Jadhav and Sen: the embracing authority to ride a powerful mother image; eschewing the weaponization of sustained challenge; why would any of them want that chaotic, charismatic woman-discourse?

Judicial and Bureaucratic Leadership

Chandra, Bhandari & Ghosh (2023) - Women in the Indian Judiciary: From Token to Transformation (1970–2023). Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy (2024) - Gender & Judging in India: women judges write longer, more empathetic bail orders for women and minors. Baxi, Singh & Parmar (2024) - Women IAS/IPS officers face "marriage posting" discrimination and are rarely posted as District Magistrates or Superintendents of Police in "hard" districts.

Emerging 2024-2025 Scholarship

More than 350 studies conducted in India demonstrate that feminine leadership achieves greater success than masculine leadership in many instances. Additionally, women-led unicorns have better employee retention and employee trust rates than comparable organizations. Studies of cooperatively-run businesses in rural India that are led by women have also been shown to have better sustainability and repayment rates than similar businesses led by men. Despite these advantages, senior female leaders often experience more emotional labour and burnout than do their male counterparts. The contradiction between these benefits and the marginalization of feminine leadership points to a systemic failure in governance, sustainability, and social justice as well as gender injustice.

Theoretical Concerns: Role Incongruity, Agency Bias, and Respectability Politics

According to Style Incongruity Theory, female leaders face punishment for being either communal or agentic. Women's bodies, behaviour, speech, ability to travel, and their work are all regulated by cultural discourses surrounding social "respectability" within South Asian cultures—izzat, lajja, and "sanskari femininity"—using safety narratives and log kya kahenge in order to maintain patriarchal dominance over women (Eagly; Heilman; Phadke et al.)

Traditional: Pre-Colonial Models of Female Authority

Pre-colonial India provided a variety of role models for women leaders that were erased or domesticated in later times.

Vedic rishikās and brahmavādinīs (Gargi, Lopamudra);

Buddhist therīs who led monastic communities

Equally, the following examples of feminine authority include women who inherited property and political authority from Kerala and Meghalaya.

Warrior queens and regents (Madhavi, Naiki Devi, Durgavati) The existence of such traditions indicates that the authority of women was connected with various community ideas which are non-hierarchical and non-forceful in nature.

Transition: Colonial and Post-Colonial Reconfigurations

"The ineluctable binary of the double tilt; culminated with the women's movement on the global stage mostly confined only to women who identify themselves [Fem. gen.] as women while making space for ensuring the undesirability of all

those who refuse to be labeled in the above-mentioned way, a stark working of multiple neoliberal and sexist agencies, which finally all fit back; the fundamental agent who plays the role of choice, the extra straight path to success, the disenchanting ordeal for the uncomplaining woman (De Beauvoir), the possibility of good character being dissolved in kosher prudence, it is a set of contra-actions and humiliations all in the name of white or black, false or true, good or evil."

Prominent Themes and Advances on Cultural and Social Constraints

Negotiating, promoting oneself, or showing anger renders a woman as "aggressive" or "unfeminine"; but to be warm and collaborative is often synonymous with lacking any gravitas. According to the Harvard Business Review India (2024), women leaders receive 35% more negative reviews on personality than men for identical behavior.

The Maternal Wall and the Caregiving Penalty

Among businesses, moms landing back are 42% less likely to be considered for a second interview under the TeamLease Women Returnee Report 2024. Flexible hours are available, but not necessarily promotion opportunities. Across classes, elder care and children's exams are still perceived as "women's work".

The Bindi Ceiling and Respectability Surveillance

The visible signs of a woman's marriage, such as sindoor, bindi, or mangalsutra, provoke the unconscious assumption that a woman's ambition would be a danger to the stability of the family. In this regard, young unmarried women are stripped of their credibility; women in the older unmarried or divorced category suffer social isolation.

Intersectional Violence

The women leaders from the Dalit and Adivasi communities are continuously subjected to sexualized slander and threats (Mayawati, Dayabati Hansda). Politics for Muslim women means that they have to deal with both Islamophobia and patriarchal control at the same time. Northeast women leaders are either put on a pedestal as exotic or dismissed as “not really Indian.”

Safety and Mobility Constraints

Women are often restricted from working late at night, being on the factory floor, or traveling to rural areas—sometimes for their safety, but often for other reasons masked as such. The 2023–24 NCRB data still records India as having one of the lowest female workforce participation rates (27%) among G20 nations.

Sponsorship and Network Exclusion

The “old boys' club” works through the partnerships of IIT/IIM alumni groups, caste networks, Rotary/Lions clubs, and family businesses. McKinsey–CII Women at the Top 2024: men are 2.8 times more likely to have active sponsors.

Case Studies of Resistance and Breakthrough

Case Study 1: Falguni Nayar - Nykaa and the Feminine Startup Ecosystem

Former Managing Director of Kotak Investment Banking, Falguni Nayar, who left behind a 20-year corporate career in 2012 at age 49 to set up Nykaa, India's leading beauty-and-wellness omnichannel platform. The market value of Nykaa stands at over ₹68,000 crore by March 2025, running on a workforce of more than 65% women and set up an ecosystem to celebrate feminine aesthetics,

community-building, and empathetic leadership. Key feminine leadership markers for her include:

Built the company around “conversations with customers” than top-down diktats, weekly open forums, and a “Customer Obsession Council” dominated by women.

Industry-first policies implemented include a 26-week fully paid maternity leave extendable to 52 weeks of unpaid leave, a policy of secondary caregiver leave for fathers/partners, fertility-treatment insurance, and so on.

Deliberately recruited women returnees (over 40% of senior leadership in 2025 are mothers who took 3 and 10 years off work).

Nayar won the title of India's wealthiest self-made woman in the 2021 Forbes index, putting to rest the qualifiers, such as “Well, it's only a lipstick company.” Mocking aside, Nykaa's IPO was the heady straw that confirmed that young money in that feminine-led businesses/direction, sales sectors, leadership, and style can still yield phenomenal unicorn-worthy profits.

Case Study 2: SEWA – The Circle Model of Collective Feminine Leadership

SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) was established by Ela Bhatt and five other women in 1972. A collective leadership of grassroots women now governs SEWA (Reema Nanavaty has been the General Secretary in 2025 and there is an 11-member elected executive committee) making it the largest organization in the world for women working in the informal sector with 2.51 million members. Feminine leadership principles are prominent in the following ways:

- Strict non-hierarchy, ‘circle’ meetings where everyone even the newest member has equal voice and weight.

- Consensus decision-making, there is no voting and discussions continue until unity is reached.
- Leadership rotation and term limits at every level.
- Integrated livelihood and care model, SEWA runs cooperatives for childcare, health, banking (SEWA Bank), and producer companies, which were all designed by women.
- Deliberate “sisterhood” nurturing: every new member is assigned a mentor from the experienced “didi” group for life. SEWA's annual turnover surpassed ₹1,200 crores and its members' combined assets exceeded ₹5,000 crores during the fiscal year 2024–25. SEWA was instrumental in the making of the National Policy for Street Vendors and the Social Security Code 2020. The organization still manages to convince the world that institutions built fully on feminine principles of care, collectivity, and mutual nurturing can still be large and financially sustainable.

Case Study 3: Dr. Tessy Thomas - “Missile Woman of India” and Quietly Feminine Technical Leadership at DRDO

Dr. Tessy Thomas, nicknamed “Agniputri,” by India could be still considered one of the women in defense R&D area, the most male-dominated sector. The positive traits of female leadership within a hypermasculine environment are manifested in these ways:

She always gave credit to the team and not only to herself; even in her interview she mentions the junior women scientists first.

In a high-pressured, security-sensitive setting, her calm and collaborative style brought her great success; her coworkers called her “motherly but

strict.”

The number of women scientists she mentored was over 200, and she even arranged flexible lab timings along with crèche facilities at Hyderabad's Missile Complex.

Dr. Tessy did not hide her Malayali-Christian roots or her married status; she would come to lead discussions with three-star generals in her mundu and cross without any tension at all. Please note that by the year 2025, the proportion of women scientists in the missile cluster of DRDO would have increased from 4% in 2010 to 23% in 2025.

Case Study 4: Kiran Bedi – Trailblazing Feminine Authority in Uniformed Services and Governance

Kiran Bedi (India's first woman IPS officer, 1972 batch; former Lieutenant Governor of Puducherry 2016–2021; and in 2025 an active prison-reform advocate, author, and mentor through the Navjyoti India Foundation and India Vision Foundation) remains one of the most recognisable symbols of feminine leadership in India's most masculine institutional spaces.

Distinctive feminine-yet-uncompromising leadership style:

- Combined strict discipline with deep empathy: as Tihar Jail IG (1993–1995), she transformed Asia's largest prison from a “living hell” into a reformatory ashram through yoga, meditation, vipassana, literacy classes, and de-addiction programmes — all while personally counselling inmates and treating them as “human beings who had lost their way.”
- Introduced women-centric reforms: separate wards for women prisoners, crèches for children staying with incarcerated mothers, and vocational training tailored to women's post-release livelihoods.

- Used maternal imagery without apology: inmates called her “Maa” or “Didi”; she openly embraced the role of a strict yet caring elder sister/mother figure within the uniformed hierarchy.
- Fearlessly challenged patriarchal bureaucracy: crane-lifted a wrongly parked car in Delhi as a traffic officer (the famous “Crane Bedi” episode), took on political heavyweights during Punjab anti-terror operations, and openly criticised the IPS “old boys’ network” throughout her career.
- Post-retirement governance in Puducherry (2016–2021): focused on cleanliness, women’s safety, water conservation, and citizen-participatory budgeting — all through relentless morning walks, direct public interaction, and a style that blended authority with approachability.
- Mentorship and institution-building: through her two NGOs (founded 1987 and 1994 respectively), she has rehabilitated over 70,000 women and children from prisons and drug-addicted families by 2025, using a distinctly relational, trust-based, and community-mothering model.

Case Study 7: Feminine Leadership in the Indian Judiciary – From Trailblazers to Transformative Collective Presence (1970–2025)

The Indian higher judiciary, long regarded as the most masculine, elitist, and tradition-bound branch of state power, has witnessed a slow but profound infiltration of feminine leadership over the last five decades. By November 2025, India has seen nine women judges in the Supreme Court (three sitting simultaneously for the first time in history: Justices B.V. Nagarathna, Hima Kohli, and Bela M. Trivedi), and women Chief Justices in nine High Courts. More importantly, a distinctly feminine

judicial temperament—marked by empathy, care ethics, procedural fairness for the marginalised, and collaborative collegiality—has begun to reshape constitutional interpretation and court culture.

Ongoing Cultural Challenges Inside the Judiciary

- “Lady Judge” remarks and paternalistic treatment by senior (male) advocates persist.
- Women judges still receive disproportionate domestic-load expectations; many delay marriage or children.
- Lack of separate washrooms and safe late-night transport in several High Courts (improved but not universal in 2025).
- Subtle resistance to women heading constitution benches on “hard” subjects like federalism or taxation.

The judiciary is perhaps the clearest 2025 example of how feminine leadership—combining empathy, procedural care, mentoring, and quiet institutional reform—can transform even the most hierarchical, tradition-bound space without compromising authority or rigour. The presence of three women on the Supreme Court bench is no longer tokenism; it is beginning to shift the very grammar of constitutional justice toward greater inclusivity and humanity.

These seven expanded case studies—from corporate India (Falguni Nayar), electoral politics (Mamata Banerjee), grassroots organising (SEWA), defence R&D (Tessy Thomas), governance/education (Atishi), uniformed services/reform (Kiran Bedi), to the highest judiciary—collectively establish that feminine leadership is not an exception but a proven, scalable, and urgently needed paradigm across

every sector of Indian public life in 202

Key Indian and Global Reports on Feminine Leadership and Gender Gaps in Power & Decision-Making (2024–2025)

Indian Reports

- *KPMG Women Leadership in Corporate India 2024 Report* Highlights systemic under-representation and biases hindering women's ascent to leadership roles.
- *LinkedIn & The Quantum Hub – Women in Leadership in Corporate India 2024* Women = 26.8% of workforce but only 18.3% of senior leadership; sharp decline in hiring post-2021.
- *McKinsey – Women in the Workplace 2025: Focus on India, Nigeria & Kenya* India has the lowest promotion ratio from entry-level to manager among the three countries.
- *Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) – Women and Men in India 2024* Official consolidated gender statistics; shows high female voter turnout but persistently low representation in Parliament, judiciary, and corporate boards.
- *Grant Thornton International Women in Business Report 2025 (India chapter)* India at 23% women in senior management (global average 33.5%); surge in women entrepreneurs but stagnation in corporate decision-making roles.
- *Great Place to Work® India – Best Workplaces for Women 2024* Women = 26% of total workforce but only 16% of executive roles.

Global & Comparative Reports

- *World Economic Forum – Global Gender Gap Report 2024* India ranks 129th out of 146 countries; 21.5 percentage-point drop from

entry-level to C-suite globally.

- *World Economic Forum – Global Gender Gap Report 2025* Global gap closed 68.8%; 123 years remaining to parity. Political empowerment improving fastest, but women still only 28.1% of senior managers worldwide.
- *OECD – Gender Equality in a Changing World 2024* Only 21% of OECD/EU countries have ever had a female head of government/executive as of January 2025.
- *Holo IQ – The 2024 Global State of Women's Leadership* Women heads of state rose from 4 (1995) to 17 (2024); parliamentary representation doubled to 26% globally.
- *McKinsey – Women in the Workplace Global Series (2021–2025)* Global benchmark: 87 women promoted to first-level manager per 100 men; India's ratio is only 52:100 — the widest gap in Asia-Pacific.

These reports collectively form the most authoritative, up-to-date evidence base (as of November 2025) for understanding both the severity of barriers to feminine leadership in India and how far the country lags behind global averages in translating women's education and workforce entry into actual positions of power and decision-making.

Indian Policies and Laws on Gender Equality: An Overview (as of November 2025)

India's commitment to gender equality is enshrined in its Constitution and reinforced through a robust framework of laws, policies, and schemes. The Preamble declares the State as secular, socialist, sovereign, democratic, and a Republic that secures "justice, liberty, equality of status and of opportunity" for all citizens, explicitly including women. Fundamental Rights under Articles 14

(equality before law), 15 (prohibition of discrimination on grounds of sex, with affirmative action for women via 15(3)), and 16 (equal opportunity in public employment) form the bedrock. Directive Principles (Articles 39 and 42) mandate equal pay for equal work and just conditions for work, including maternity relief. India ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1993, obligating it to eliminate discrimination in all spheres.

Despite these foundations, implementation gaps

persist, as highlighted in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2025, where India ranks 129th out of 146 countries. Recent reforms under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (2023) and ongoing schemes aim to address violence, economic participation, and political representation. Below is a categorized summary of key policies, laws, and initiatives.

Constitutional and Legal Framework

These provide the foundational guarantees and enforcement mechanisms for gender equality.

Table 1: Constitutional and Legal Framework

Policy/Law	Year	Key Provisions	Impact/Status (2025)
Constitution of India (Articles 14, 15, 16, 39, 42)	1950 (amended)	Equality before law; no discrimination on grounds of sex; affirmative action for women; equal pay; maternity relief.	Core enabler; Article 15(3) allows positive discrimination. Enforced via Supreme Court judgments (e.g., Vishaka Guidelines, 1997, for workplace harassment).
73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments	1993	33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs); increased to 50% in many states.	Over 1.4 million women elected to local bodies; enhanced grassroots participation, though "proxy rule" by male relatives persists in some areas.
Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA)	2005	Defines domestic violence broadly; provides protection orders, residence rights, and monetary relief.	Operational via Protection Officers and One-Stop Centres; handled 4.5 lakh cases in 2024, but underreporting remains high.
Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act (POSH)	2013	Mandates Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs); penalties for non-compliance.	Covers organized/unorganized sectors; 2025 amendments propose stricter timelines for inquiries.
Dowry Prohibition Act	1961 (amended 1986)	Bans giving/taking dowry; criminalizes related harassment.	Linked to IPC Sections 304B and 498A; 7,000+ cases annually, but low conviction rates (under 30%).
Prohibition of Child Marriage Act	2006	Sets minimum marriage age at 18 for women/21 for men; penalties for violations.	Reduced child marriages by 20% (NFHS-5, 2019–21); 2025 enforcement drives in high-prevalence states like Bihar.
Equal Remuneration Act	1976 (integrated into Code on Wages, 2019)	Equal pay for equal work; no discrimination in recruitment/promotion.	Applies to all sectors; 2025 audits show 20–30% gender pay gap persists, especially in informal economy.
Maternity Benefit Act	(amended 2017)	26 weeks paid maternity leave; creche facilities for firms with 50+ employees.	Extended to contractual workers; uptake at 60% in formal sector, but challenges in SMEs.
Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS)	2023 (effective 2024)	Replaces IPC; strengthens provisions on gender-based violence, including marital rape recognition (per Justice Verma Committee, 2013).	Reduced sentence for rape to life/death; 2025 data shows 15% rise in FIRs for sexual offenses.
Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (Women's Reservation Bill)	2023 (effective post-2026 delimitation)	33% reservation for women in Lok Sabha and state assemblies.	Pending implementation; aims to boost parliamentary representation from 14.7% (2024).
Code on Social Security, 2020	2020 (rules notified 2024)	Extends benefits (maternity, gratuity) to gig/unorganized workers; gender-neutral provisions.	Covers 8 crore+ informal women workers; 2025 rollout via e-Shram portal.

National Policies and Strategies

These outline long-term visions for empowerment and integration.

- *National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (NPEW)* (2001, under review 2025): Aims for gender justice in laws (e.g., property/inheritance reforms); promotes women's participation in decision-making, violence prevention, and economic independence. Focuses on Panchayati Raj, health, and education; 2025 updates emphasize digital literacy and climate-resilient livelihoods.
- *National Policy for Women (proposed 2016, integrated into NPEW)*: Builds on CEDAW;

targets elimination of discrimination in health, education, and employment.

- *Gender Budgeting Framework* (2005–ongoing): Allocates 5–6% of Union Budget (₹3.1 lakh crore in 2025–26) to women-specific schemes; tracks gender-disaggregated outcomes.

India's Gender Policies: Alignment and Gaps with Global Standards

India's framework—spanning constitutional mandates, laws like POSH (2013), and schemes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP, 2015)—aligns with SDG 5 but underperforms globally.

Table 2 : Gender Policies: Alignment and Gaps

Dimension (SDG 5/GGGI)	Global Standard (2025)	India's Performance (2025)	Key Policies	Gaps
Economic Participation	60.5% closed; women 41.2% of workforce, 28.8% leaders	40.7% parity (144th); LFPR 37% (women <20% GDP contribution)	PM Mudra Yojana (women 70% beneficiaries); Maternity Benefit Act (2017)	30-40% pay gap; <1/3 women earned income vs. men; trails global avg. by 19.8 pts.
Educational Attainment	>95% parity	97.1% parity (strong)	Right to Education Act (2009); BBBP	Near-global parity, but dropout rates higher for girls in rural north (e.g., 15% vs. 10% global).
Health & Survival	96% parity	95.4% parity	POSHAN Abhiyaan (2018); Janani Suraksha Yojana	MMR 97/100k (vs. global 223); sex ratio 929 (NFHS-5), improved but below SDG target.
Political Empowerment	22.5% closed; 26% parliamentary women	24.5% parity; 13.8% MPs (down from 14.7%)	Nari Shakti Vandan (2023); 73rd/74th Amendments (50% PRI women in 15 states)	5.6% ministers (vs. global 22%); implementation delay on reservation bill.
Violence Reduction	19% child marriage rate; 26% tracking systems	23% child marriages; 29.2% spousal violence	PWDVA (2005); Nirbhaya Fund (₹7,212 cr.)	Low conviction (30%); exceeds global avg. in dowry deaths post-droughts.

Comparative Study: Gender Equality Across Indian States

India's federalism yields diverse outcomes, with southern states leveraging education and health

investments for parity, while northern ones grapple with cultural biases. Using NFHS-5, SDG India Index, and 2025 state data, Table 3 compares select states across SDG 5 indicators (scores: 0-100, higher=better parity).

Table 3: State/UT wise keys factors based on SDG 5

State/UT	Sex Ratio (per 1,000 males)	Female LFPR (%)	Women's Empowerment Score (NFHS-5)	SDG 5 Index (NITI 2023-24)	Key Factors
Kerala (South)	1,084	28.5	82 (high autonomy in decisions)	79	Matrilineal traditions; 100% female literacy; low violence (15%). Leads nationally.
Tamil Nadu (South)	996	32.1	75	70	Strong SHGs (Mahila Shakti Kendra); 46% STEM women grads.
Himachal Pradesh (North)	972	41.2	68	65	High education parity but pay gap (25%); improving via gender budgeting.
Haryana (North)	889	19.8	55 (low mobility)	52	Son preference; skewed ratio despite BBBP; 40% PRI women but proxy rule common.
Bihar (East)	918	21.4	48	<50	High child marriage (40%); low literacy (60%); trails by 30 pts. vs. Kerala.
Goa (West)	985	29.7	70	68	Urban advantages; 100% school toilets for girls; low GII variance.

Conclusion: Toward a Relational Reimagining of Power

The evidence presented in this chapter—from corporate unicorns to the Supreme Court bench, from SEWA's circles to Delhi's transformed classrooms—demonstrates unequivocally that feminine leadership is not ornamental but foundational to sustainable, equitable, and resilient institutions. In 2025, India stands at a crossroads: it can continue to punish empathy as weakness and collaboration as indecision, thereby forfeiting half its leadership capital, or it can consciously dismantle the cultural architecture that equates

legitimate authority exclusively with stereotypically masculine traits.

The persistence of the double-bind, maternal wall, bindi ceiling, and intersectional violence is not merely a gender injustice; it is a profound national loss. When feminine ways of leading are delegitimised, India deprives itself of the very qualities—care, consensus, long-term ethical orientation, and relational intelligence—most urgently needed to address burnout cultures, ecological crises, rising inequality, and eroding social trust. The seven case studies illustrate that wherever feminine leadership is granted authentic

space, it delivers superior outcomes in trust, retention, innovation, and justice. The challenge, therefore, is no longer one of capability but of permission.

Recommendations: From Policy to Cultural Transformation

Institutional Reforms

- Mandate annual gender-sensitisation and unconscious-bias training for all senior leadership cohorts (corporate boards, IAS/IPS, judiciary, university Vcs).
- Legislate publicly tracked sponsorship/mentorship programmes with minimum 50% women mentees and measurable promotion outcomes.
- Extend POSH Act coverage to political parties, religious bodies, and informal-sector collectives by 2027.
- Offer tax rebates and ESG-linked incentives to companies achieving >40% women in profit-and-loss roles with genuine career-tracked flexibility.

Political and Legal Measures

- Fast-track implementation of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (2023) and introduce 33% reservation in Rajya Sabha and state legislative councils by 2028.
- Introduce intersectional sub-quotas (SC/ST/OBC/minority women) in party tickets and public funding.
- Criminalise marital rape without further delay and establish specialised courts for online gendered violence.

Cultural and Educational Interventions

- Revise NCERT textbooks (Classes 6–12) to include chapters on historical and contemporary feminine leadership models (Gargi to Falguni Nayar).
- Launch a national multimedia campaign “Empathy is Strategy” featuring the seven case studies profiled here.
- Fund women-led night transport cooperatives and safety audits in every Tier-1 and Tier-2 city by 2030.

Data and Accountability

- Create a National Feminine Leadership Index (annual, disaggregated by caste, religion, region) under NITI Aayog.
- Require all listed companies and public institutions to publish annual “Feminine Leadership Scorecards” (representation + sponsorship + retention metrics).

Only when India stops perceiving empathy, care, and collaboration as liabilities—and begins recognising them as the most sophisticated forms of power—will it fully harness the leadership potential of its women and of all those who lead with relational intelligence. The future is not gender-neutral; it is distinctly feminine.

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