Naveen Shodh Sansar (An International Refereed / Peer Review Multidisciplinary Research Journal)
RNI No.- MPHIN/2013/60638, ISSN 2320-8767, E- ISSN 2394-3793, Scientific Journal Impact Factor (SJIF)- 8.054,
April to June 2026, E-Journal, Vol. I, Issue LIV (54), ISO 9001:2015 - E2024049304 (QMS)

Women's Legal Status & Rights in the Indian Constitution: A Constitutional and Legislative Analysis

Dr. Najneen Khan* Dr. Nirmal Kumar Pagariya**

*APSU University, Rewa (M.P.) INDIA
** Retd. Professor, Indore Law College, Indore (M.P.) INDIA

Abstract: The Indian Constitution, adopted on 26 November 1949, stands as one of the most progressive constitutional documents in the world with respect to gender equality. This paper examines the constitutional and legislative framework governing the legal status and rights of women in India, tracing the provisions embedded in the Fundamental Rights (Part III), the Directive Principles of State Policy (Part IV), and the Fundamental Duties (Part IVA). It analyses key parliamentary legislation enacted to give effect to constitutional guarantees, including the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act 2013, the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act 2005, and the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam 2023. The paper further surveys landmark Supreme Court judgments that have progressively expanded the scope of women's rights through creative constitutional interpretation. A critical assessment of challenges encompassing socio-cultural barriers, implementation gaps, economic dependence, and intersecting disadvantages of caste and class reveals that despite a robust de jure framework, de facto equality remains elusive for millions of Indian women. The paper concludes with targeted recommendations for bridging the enduring gap between constitutional promise and social reality.
Keywords: Indian Constitution, women's rights, gender equality, Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles, landmark judgments, women's reservation, implementation gap.

Introduction - The history of women in India is one of paradox: goddesses venerated alongside women subjugated. For centuries prior to independence, women in India were largely denied legal personhood. They were excluded from property ownership, constrained by personal laws that sanctioned polygamy and unilateral divorce, barred from public office, and rendered almost entirely dependent on male guardians for their social and economic existence. The colonial period, while it introduced reformist legislation such as the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856 and the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, left the fundamental structures of patriarchal subordination largely intact.

It was therefore a moment of profound historical significance when the Constituent Assembly of India, which included notable women members such as Sarojini Naidu, Hansa Mehta, Amrit Kaur, Durgabai Deshmukh, and Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, deliberated the shape of an independent nation's foundational law. These women advocated successfully for the inclusion of explicit equality provisions, resisting proposals that would have relegated women's rights to mere policy aspirations. The result was a Constitution that, from its very Preamble, promised Justice, Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity to all its citizens irrespective of sex.

This research paper undertakes a comprehensive examination of women's legal status and rights under the Indian constitutional and statutory order. It proceeds in seven parts: an analysis of the constitutional framework including Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles, and Fundamental Duties; a survey of the principal legislative measures enacted for women's protection and empowerment; a review of landmark judicial interpretations that have shaped the contemporary understanding of gender rights; an assessment of women's political participation and representation; a critical evaluation of persistent challenges and implementation gaps; and finally, a set of conclusions and recommendations directed toward realising the Constitution's egalitarian vision in practice.

The thesis central to this paper is that the Indian Constitution provides one of the most robust de jure frameworks for gender equality in the world, yet a profound and troubling gap persists between constitutional aspiration and social reality, a gap that demands urgent attention from lawmakers, courts, civil society, and citizens alike.

Constitutional Framework for Women's Rights: The Indian Constitution addresses the question of women's rights and gender equality across multiple Parts, adopting a comprehensive approach that combines justiciable Fundamental Rights with directive policy principles and

citizen duties. Together, these provisions create a multi-layered normative architecture designed to eliminate historical disadvantages faced by women and to create conditions for substantive equality.

Fundamental Rights (Part III)

Part III of the Constitution, comprising Articles 12 to 35, enumerates the Fundamental Rights enforceable against the State. Several of these provisions have direct and critical relevance to women's equality and protection.

Article 14 — Equality Before Law: This Article guarantees that "the State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India." For women, Article 14 has been the constitutional anchor for challenging laws and executive actions that arbitrarily discriminate on the basis of gender. The Supreme Court has consistently held that laws targeting women without rational justification violate Article 14.

Article 15 — Prohibition of Discrimination: Article 15(1) prohibits the State from discriminating against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. However, the provision most transformative for women is Article 15(3), which creates an enabling exception: "Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children." This clause is the constitutional foundation for affirmative action and reservation policies benefiting women, including reservations in local government and Parliament.

Article 16 — Equality of Opportunity in Public Employment: Article 16 guarantees equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the State. It prohibits discrimination on grounds that include sex, thereby ensuring women's equal access to public employment, and has been relied upon extensively in litigation challenging gender-based exclusions from government service and promotions.

Article 21 — Right to Life and Personal Liberty: Perhaps the most expansively interpreted fundamental right, Article 21 declares that "no person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law." Through landmark decisions, the Supreme Court has given Article 21 rich and evolving content with profound implications for women: the right to live with dignity, the right to privacy and bodily autonomy (K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India, 2017), the right to livelihood, the right to health, and the right to be free from sexual harassment at the workplace.

Article 23 — Prohibition of Trafficking: Article 23 prohibits traffic in human beings and forced labour, declaring any contravention to be a punishable offence. Since women constitute the overwhelming majority of victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation and bonded labour, this provision, coupled with the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act 1956, forms a critical part of the protective constitutional architecture.

Directive Principles of State Policy (Part IV)

Part IV of the Constitution (Articles 36-51) contains the Directive Principles of State Policy, which, while not enforceable in courts, are "fundamental in the governance of the country" and obligate the State to apply them in making laws (Article 37). Several Directive Principles are of direct relevance to women's economic, social, and legal equality.

Article 39(a) mandates that the State shall direct its policy towards securing the right to an adequate means of livelihood for both men and women citizens. Article 39(d) directs equal pay for equal work for both men and women, a principle given statutory expression in the Equal Remuneration Act 1976. Article 42 mandates the State to make provision for just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief, forming the constitutional basis of the Maternity Benefit Act. Article 44 envisages a Uniform Civil Code for citizens across India, a still-contested provision with significant implications for women subject to discriminatory personal laws in matters of marriage, divorce, and succession. Article 46 requires the State to promote the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections, which has been interpreted to encompass gender as a dimension of structural disadvantage.

Fundamental Duties (Part IVA)

The Forty-Second Constitutional Amendment (1976) inserted Part IVA containing Fundamental Duties. Article 51A(e) specifically imposes on every citizen of India the duty "to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women." Though non-justiciable, this duty is constitutionally significant as a statement of civic obligation and has been relied upon by courts in shaping the content of other rights, including the right to dignity under Article 21.

Table 1 (see in last page)

Legislative Measures for Women's Protection: The constitutional framework described above has been supplemented by an extensive body of parliamentary legislation that seeks to translate constitutional guarantees into enforceable legal norms. These statutes operate across criminal law, civil remedy, labour rights, property rights, political empowerment, and workplace safety, reflecting the multi-dimensional nature of gender inequality in India.

Criminal Law Protections: The Indian Penal Code 1860, now substantially replaced by the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023, has long contained provisions targeting crimes against women, including rape (Section 376), cruelty by husband or his relatives (Section 498A), dowry death (Section 304B), and kidnapping or abduction for marriage (Section 366). The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013, enacted in the wake of the December 2012 Delhi gang-rape case, substantially overhauled the legal response to sexual offences. The amended law expanded the definition of rape to include non-penetrative acts, created new offences of stalking, voyeurism, acid attack, and trafficking, enhanced minimum sentences, and introduced fast-track courts for sexual offence cases.

The Dowry Prohibition Act 1961 prohibits the giving and taking of dowry, with penalties extending to imprisonment of up to five years and a fine of no less than fifteen thousand rupees or the value of dowry, whichever is higher. The Act has been strengthened through successive amendments, and its violation is treated as a cognisable, non-bailable offence under the Code of Criminal Procedure.

Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005: Enacted in fulfilment of India's obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005 (PWDVA) represents a landmark legislative achievement. For the first time, the Act provided a comprehensive civil law remedy for domestic violence, covering physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, and economic abuse within domestic relationships.

The Act provides for a range of reliefs including protection orders (restraining the respondent from committing acts of violence), residence orders (securing the aggrieved woman's right to reside in the shared household), monetary relief (for medical expenses, loss of earnings, and maintenance), custody orders for children, and compensation orders. It created a new institutional architecture including Protection Officers, Service Providers, and Magistrate Courts with jurisdiction to grant emergency relief within 60 days. Since its enactment, the PWDVA has been used by hundreds of thousands of women across India and has been progressively interpreted by courts to extend protection to women in live-in relationships.

Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013: The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013 (POSH Act) was enacted sixteen years after the Supreme Court's Vishaka Guidelines (discussed in Section 4) to provide a statutory framework for preventing and addressing sexual harassment in the workplace. The Act defines sexual harassment broadly to encompass unwelcome physical contact, demand for sexual favours, sexually coloured remarks, showing pornography, and any other unwelcome physical, verbal, or non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature. Every employer is required to constitute an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) at each workplace with ten or more employees, with a woman presiding officer and at least half of the members being women. A Local Complaints Committee (LCC) at the district level covers unorganised sector workers and cases against employers themselves. The Act imposes penalties for non-compliance including cancellation of business licences.

Property and Succession Rights: The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act 2005 effected a transformative change in inheritance law by amending the Hindu Succession Act 1956 to grant daughters equal coparcenary rights in joint family property. Prior to this amendment, daughters could claim a share only upon partition and lost their rights upon marriage. The amended Section 6 confers on daughters the same rights and liabilities as sons in respect of coparcenary property, a right that inheres by birth. In Vineeta Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma (2020), a three-judge bench of the Supreme Court affirmed that this right is available to daughters born before the 2005 amendment as well, provided the coparcener father was alive at the time of the amendment.

Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017: The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act 2017 amended the Maternity Benefit Act 1961 to significantly enhance protections for working mothers. The most significant change was the increase in paid maternity leave from twelve to twenty-six weeks for working women with fewer than two surviving children. The Act additionally mandates creche facilities for establishments employing fifty or more employees, requires employers to permit women four visits to the creche per day, and provides for work-from-home options where the nature of work permits. These provisions reflect a growing recognition that workplace accommodation for maternal responsibilities is a component of the right to equal participation in the labour force.

Women's Reservation Act, 2023: The Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act 2023, also known as the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, reserves not less than one-third of all seats in the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, and the Delhi Legislative Assembly for women. The reserved seats are to be allocated by rotation to different constituencies in each general election. Critically, the reservation is linked to the completion of the next delimitation exercise and the subsequent census, meaning its implementation is expected in the general elections scheduled for 2029 at the earliest. The Act also reserves one-third of the seats reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes for women from those communities.

Table 2 (see in last page)

Judicial Interpretation and Landmark Judgments: The Indian judiciary, and in particular the Supreme Court of India, has played a transformative role in expanding the constitutional rights of women far beyond what a literal reading of the text might suggest. Through the technique of progressive constitutional interpretation, often described as a "living constitutionalism," courts have consistently read gender equality and women's dignity into the broad provisions of Parts III and IV.

Workplace Sexual Harassment: Vishaka and Its Legacy: Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan (1997) is perhaps the most celebrated women's rights judgment in Indian constitutional history. The case arose from the brutal gang rape of Bhanwari Devi, a social worker in Rajasthan who had been trying to prevent a child marriage. Confronted with the absence of legislation on workplace sexual harassment, a three-judge bench of the Supreme Court exercised its extraordinary power under Article 32 to lay down binding guidelines for the prevention, prohibition, and redressal of

sexual harassment at the workplace. The Vishaka Guidelines, drawing on CEDAW and international human rights standards, remained in force as binding law for sixteen years until replaced by the POSH Act 2013.

Triple Talaq: Shayara Bano v. Union of India (2017): In Shayara Bano v. Union of India (2017), a five-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court addressed the constitutionality of the practice of talaq-e-biddat (triple talaq), by which a Muslim husband could instantly and irrevocably dissolve a marriage by pronouncing "talaq" three times. By a majority of 3:2, the Court declared the practice unconstitutional as violating Articles 14 and 21. The minority held that it was a matter of personal law beyond constitutional challenge. Following the judgment, Parliament enacted the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act 2019, which criminalises the practice of instant triple talaq.

Adultery Law: Joseph Shine v. Union of India (2018): In Joseph Shine v. Union of India (2018), a five-judge Constitution Bench unanimously struck down Section 497 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalised adultery. The Court held that the provision was unconstitutional on multiple grounds: it treated women as the property of their husbands, denied women agency over their sexual choices, and discriminated on the basis of sex. Chief Justice Dipak Misra observed that "a wife is not the chattel of the husband" and that any law premised on that assumption violated the core constitutional guarantee of dignity under Article 21.

Right to Worship: Sabarimala Temple Case (2018): Indian Young Lawyers Association v. State of Kerala (2018) presented the Supreme Court with the question whether a centuries-old tradition of excluding women between the ages of ten and fifty from the Sabarimala temple was constitutionally valid. By a 4:1 majority, the Court held that the exclusion violated Articles 14, 15, and 25, ruling that the right to religious practice did not extend to discriminating against women on the basis of physiological characteristics. The lone dissenting judge held that the practice constituted an "essential religious practice" protected under Article 26. The judgment sparked significant public controversy and subsequent litigation.

Armed Forces: Secretary, Ministry of Defence v. Babita Puniya (2020): In Babita Puniya v. Union of India (2020), the Supreme Court directed that women officers in the Indian Army be granted permanent commission and made eligible for command appointments, rejecting the government's argument that women were physiologically unsuitable for command roles. The Court held that denial of permanent commission to women officers violated Articles 14 and 16 and was premised on "outdated and paternalistic" stereotypes about women's capabilities that had no place in constitutional law.

Table 3 (see in last page)

Political Participation and Representation: The Constitution of India grants women the right to vote and to stand for election on terms identical to men, making the principle of political equality a foundational guarantee. Article 326 confers adult suffrage on all citizens without discrimination, and Article 325 prohibits any person from being ineligible for inclusion in electoral rolls on grounds of sex, among others. However, the translation of these formal guarantees into meaningful political representation has been a slow and contested process.

Local Self-Government: The 73rd and 74th Amendments: The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act 1992 and the Constitution (Seventy-Fourth Amendment) Act 1992 introduced mandatory reservation of not less than one-third of seats for women in Panchayati Raj institutions and Urban Local Bodies respectively, under Articles 243D and 243T. These amendments are rightly regarded as one of the most successful affirmative action measures in Indian constitutional history. By 2023, more than 1.4 million elected women representatives occupied positions in gram panchayats, panchayat samitis, and zila parishads across India.

The practical impact of local-level reservation has been significant. Studies by the World Bank and the International Centre for Research on Women have documented that women sarpanchs (village heads) in reserved constituencies show measurable improvements in public goods provision, particularly in areas of water supply, sanitation, and girls' education. Several states, including Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan, have increased their reservation quota to fifty percent.

National Legislature: Women's Reservation Act, 2023

The enactment of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam 2023 marked the culmination of three decades of legislative effort to extend reservation to Parliament. The Women's Reservation Bill was first introduced in 1996 and was repeatedly stalled due to demands for sub-reservation for OBC women and other political disagreements. The 2023 Act, passed with near-unanimous support in both Houses, reserves not less than one-third of seats in the Lok Sabha, State Assemblies, and the Delhi Legislative Assembly for women through rotation across constituencies.

However, the Act's implementation is contingent on the completion of the delimitation exercise following the first census conducted after the Act's commencement. Given that the 2021 Census was delayed and has not yet been concluded, the reservation is expected to come into effect no earlier than the 2029 general elections. Critics have argued that this built-in delay represents a failure of political will, while proponents maintain that linking reservation to delimitation is constitutionally necessary to ensure equitable distribution.

Table 4 (see in last page)

Challenges and Implementation Gaps: Despite the constitutional and legislative framework described in the preceding sections, the realisation of substantive gender

equality in India remains a work profoundly in progress. A persistent and troubling gap separates the aspirational architecture of the law from the lived experience of millions of Indian women. This section examines the principal dimensions of that gap.

The De Jure-De Facto Divide: India's de jure legal framework for women's rights is, by global standards, remarkably comprehensive. Yet the country's performance on comparative gender equality indices tells a sobering story. In the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023, India ranked 127th out of 146 countries. The country performs particularly poorly on the economic participation and opportunity sub-index, where it ranks 142nd, reflecting the stark gap between constitutional guarantees of equal opportunity and the reality of female labour force participation.

Similarly, despite the Dowry Prohibition Act having been on the statute book since 1961, the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) Data for 2022 recorded 6,450 dowry deaths across India. Reported crimes against women including rape, kidnapping, assault, and cruelty by husbands continued at a rate of over 4,45,000 cases per year. These figures, while significant, are widely regarded by experts as substantial undercounts given the barriers to reporting.

Socio-Cultural Barriers and Patriarchal Norms: One of the deepest structural obstacles to the realisation of women's constitutional rights is the enduring power of patriarchal norms, caste hierarchies, and religious customs that operate as de facto legal systems in large parts of India, particularly in rural areas. Khap panchayats and caste councils have continued to issue diktats restricting women's freedom of movement, clothing, and choice of marriage partner, often with impunity. Honour-based violence remains a significant threat to women who exercise their constitutional rights.

Female foeticide and infanticide, though prohibited under the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PC-PNDT) Act 1994, have contributed to severely skewed sex ratios in many districts, particularly in the states of Haryana, Punjab, and Rajasthan. The 2011 Census recorded a child sex ratio of 914 girls per 1000 boys nationally, with some districts falling as low as 774, reflecting deep-seated son preference that no law has yet fully eradicated.

Access to Justice: The formal legal system, while offering significant protections on paper, remains inaccessible to large numbers of women due to multiple overlapping barriers. Geographic distance from courts, legal aid offices, and police stations disproportionately affects rural women. The financial cost of litigation, even where legal aid is available, creates deterrent effects. Police attitudes — characterised in research by the National Law School as "victim-blaming" in a significant proportion of cases — deter reporting of crimes ranging from rape to domestic violence. The under-representation of women in the legal profession, particularly at the higher judiciary, further affects access. As of 2024, only three of thirty-four judges of the Supreme Court of India are women, and no woman has yet served as Chief Justice of India. In district and sessions courts, female judges constitute approximately 30 percent of the judiciary, a figure that, while improving, reflects the persistence of structural barriers in legal education and appointment.

Economic Dependence: Economic dependence remains one of the most powerful impediments to women's ability to exercise their legal rights. A woman who is financially dependent on her husband or in-laws faces severe practical barriers to invoking the Domestic Violence Act, seeking divorce, or reporting crimes. India's female labour force participation rate, at approximately 37 percent in 2023 (International Labour Organization data), though showing improvement from a historic low of 23 percent in 2018, remains well below the male rate of 77 percent and the global average of 47 percent.

The gender wage gap further compounds this problem. Despite the Equal Remuneration Act 1976 and the mandate of Article 39(d), the International Labour Organization estimates that Indian women earn approximately 34 percent less than men for comparable work, one of the widest gender wage gaps in the Asia-Pacific region. Women's ownership of productive assets, including land and housing, remains far below that of men, limiting their collateral for credit and their resilience in the face of family breakdown.

Intersectionality: Caste, Class, Religion, and Gender

The concept of intersectionality — the interaction of multiple dimensions of identity and disadvantage — is particularly salient for Indian women. Dalit women face a compounded burden of caste discrimination and gender discrimination that is qualitatively distinct from either form of discrimination experienced alone. Data from the NCRB indicates that Dalit women are disproportionately represented among the victims of rape, sexual assault, and atrocity offences.

Adivasi (tribal) women face similar compounded disadvantages, including threats to their land rights, vulnerability to displacement from development projects, and restricted access to healthcare and education. Muslim women navigating the intersection of religious personal law and constitutional equality rights occupy a particularly complex legal space, as demonstrated by the decade-long constitutional litigation over triple talaq and related practices. A rights framework that addresses only gender, without attending to these intersecting structures of disadvantage, will inevitably fail to protect the most vulnerable women.

Table 5, 6 (see in lst page)

Conclusion: This paper has traced the architecture of women's legal rights and status across the constitutional, legislative, and judicial dimensions of the Indian legal order. The picture that emerges is one of remarkable normative ambition: a Constitution that, at its founding, embedded gender equality as a non-negotiable principle; a body of

legislation that has expanded and deepened protections over seven decades; and a judiciary that has, in its best moments, served as a courageous champion of women's constitutional rights, reading dignity, privacy, and equality generously into the fundamental rights provisions.

And yet, the paper has also documented the persistent and deep failure of these de jure guarantees to translate into de facto equality for the majority of Indian women. The Global Gender Gap Report, NCRB crime data, female labour force participation rates, and the representation of women in Parliament and the judiciary all tell a consistent story: the gap between constitutional promise and social reality is wide, measurable, and morally unacceptable.

The causes of this gap are multiple and mutually reinforcing. They include the structural inadequacy of enforcement mechanisms; the persistence of socio-cultural norms that treat women as subordinate; the economic dependence that prevents women from exercising formal rights; the intersecting disadvantages of caste, class, religion, and gender; and the insufficient representation of women in the institutions that make, interpret, and enforce the law. Closing this gap requires action on all of these fronts simultaneously.

Recommendations

1. **Early Implementation of Political Reservation:** The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam 2023 should be operationalised at the earliest feasible opportunity. Parliament should consider expediting the census and delimitation exercises to enable implementation by 2029. States should simultaneously increase local body reservation to fifty percent, following the lead of Bihar and Rajasthan.
2. **Uniform Civil Code:** Serious, consultative engagement on the Uniform Civil Code as envisioned by Article 44 should be undertaken, with specific attention to ensuring that any such code ensures at minimum equal rights in marriage, divorce, maintenance, and succession for women of all religious communities, without targeting or stigmatising any particular community.
3. **Strengthening Access to Justice:** The number of Fast Track Special Courts for sexual offence cases should be significantly increased. Legal aid services for women, including mobile legal aid clinics in rural areas, should be expanded. Mandatory gender sensitisation training for police officers, magistrates, and public prosecutors should be institutionalised and rigorously monitored.
4. **Economic Empowerment:** Interventions to increase female labour force participation, including expanded childcare infrastructure, enforcement of the POSH Act, and skill development programmes for rural women, should be treated as constitutional imperatives. The gender wage gap should be monitored systematically and addressed through both legislation and enforcement.
5. **Intersectional Approach:** Data collection on crimes against women and social indicators should be routinely disaggregated by caste, religion, and tribal status to enable targeted interventions for the most disadvantaged groups. Specific programmes for Dalit women, Adivasi women, and women from religious minorities should be designed in consultation with the communities concerned.
6. **Increasing Women in Judiciary and Legal Profession:** The Supreme Court Collegium and High Court Collegiums should adopt and publish transparent gender targets for judicial appointments. Law schools should actively recruit women students from underrepresented communities and create mentorship pathways to senior advocacy and judicial careers.

Ultimately, the realisation of women's constitutional rights in India is not a project confined to the legal domain. It requires a fundamental cultural transformation in how women are valued, heard, and empowered across Indian society. The Constitution has provided the roadmap. The task of every generation is to walk the distance between the promise of the text and the reality of lives lived under it.

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Table 1: Key Constitutional Provisions for Women's Rights

Article	Part	Provision	Relevance to Women
Art. 14	Part III	Equality before law	Guarantees equal legal status to all persons including women
Art. 15(1)	Part III	Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of sex	Prevents gender-based State discrimination
Art. 15(3)	Part III	Special provisions for women and children	Enables affirmative action and reservations for women
Art. 16	Part III	Equality of opportunity in public employment	Equal access to government jobs for women
Art. 21	Part III	Right to life and personal liberty	Expanded to include dignity, privacy, and bodily autonomy
Art. 23	Part III	Prohibition of trafficking and forced labour	Directly protects women from trafficking and exploitation
Art. 39(a)	Part IV	Right to adequate means of livelihood	Economic security and livelihood for women
Art. 39(d)	Part IV	Equal pay for equal work	Wage equality between men and women
Art. 42	Part IV	Maternity relief	Just conditions of work and maternity benefits
Art. 44	Part IV	Uniform Civil Code	Aims to eliminate discriminatory personal laws
Art. 46	Part IV	Promotion of weaker sections	Educational and economic upliftment of women
Art. 51A(e)	Part IVA	Renounce practices derogatory to dignity of women	Civic duty imposed on every citizen of India

Table 2: Key Legislation for Women's Protection in India

Legislation	Year	Key Provisions	Objective
Dowry Prohibition Act	1961	Prohibits giving/taking dowry; penalty up to 5 years imprisonment	Eliminate dowry-related violence and extortion
Equal Remuneration Act	1976	Equal pay for equal work regardless of gender	Achieve wage parity between men and women
Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act	2005	Protection, residence, monetary relief, and custody orders	Comprehensive civil remedy for all forms of domestic abuse
Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act	2005	Equal coparcenary rights to daughters in joint family property	Eliminate gender discrimination in property succession
Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (POSH)	2013	Mandates ICC; broad definition of sexual harassment	Ensure safe and dignified workplace for women
Criminal Law (Amendment) Act	2013	Expanded rape definition; new offences of stalking, acid attack, voyeurism	Stronger criminal deterrence post-Nirbhaya case
Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act	2017	26 weeks paid maternity leave; mandatory creche facility	Support working mothers and reduce career penalties
Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (Women's Reservation Act)	2023	33% reservation in Lok Sabha and State Legislatures	Political empowerment and representative governance

Table 3: Landmark Supreme Court Judgments on Women's Rights

Case	Year	Key Issue	Outcome / Significance
Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan	1997	Workplace sexual harassment	Laid down binding Vishaka Guidelines; foundation of POSH Act
Lata Singh v. State of U.P.	2006	Inter-caste marriage / honour killing	Affirmed woman's right to marry person of her own choice
Shayara Bano v. Union of India	2017	Triple talaq (instant divorce)	Declared unconstitutional; led to Muslim Women Act 2019
Joseph Shine v. Union of India	2018	Adultery law (S.497 IPC)	Struck down as unconstitutional; women not chattel of husband
Indian Young Lawyers Assn. v. State of Kerala	2018	Women's entry into Sabarimala temple	Exclusion held unconstitutional; equal right to worship upheld
Vineeta Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma	2020	Daughters' coparcenary rights	Rights available regardless of date of birth or father's death
Secy., Min. of Defence v. Babita Puniya	2020	Permanent commission for women in Army	Women officers entitled to permanent commission and command posts

Table 4: Women's Political Representation in India — Timeline of Key Milestones

Year / Instrument	Development	Impact
1950 - Constitution	Universal adult suffrage under Articles 325 and 326	Women gained equal voting rights at Independence
1992 - 73rd Amendment	33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions	Over 1.4 million women now serve as elected local body representatives
1992 - 74th Amendment	33% reservation in Urban Local Bodies (municipalities)	Increased women's participation in urban governance
2009 - Rajya Sabha	Women's Reservation Bill (108th Amendment) passed in Rajya Sabha	Proposed 33% seats in Parliament; lapsed due to Lok Sabha non-passage
2023 - 106th Amendment	Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam: 33% in Lok Sabha and State Legislatures	Historic step; implementation awaits delimitation and census
2024 - 18th Lok Sabha	74 women elected to Lok Sabha	~13.6% representation; below South Asian and global averages

Table 5: Key Challenges in Implementation of Women's Rights in India

Challenge Area	Description	Impact
Access to Justice	Low legal literacy; costly litigation; police attitudes; geographic barriers	Many women unable to seek or receive legal remedies
Socio-Cultural Barriers	Patriarchal norms, khap panchayat diktats, honour-based violence, son preference	Constitutional rights undermined by parallel social enforcement systems
Economic Dependence	Female LFPR ~37%; gender wage gap ~34%; low asset ownership	Financial dependence limits autonomy and ability to exercise legal rights
Political Under-Representation	Women hold ~13.6% of Lok Sabha seats; below South Asian average	Policy-making and legislation lack adequate gender perspective
Intersectionality	Dalit, Adivasi, and minority women face compounded discrimination	One-size approach fails the most vulnerable women
Enforcement Gaps	Understaffed police, low conviction rates, delayed trials in crimes against women	Deterrence effect of criminal law significantly weakened
Personal Law Discrimination	Divergent personal laws on marriage, divorce, maintenance, and succession	Women from minority communities may lack equal rights in family matters

Table 6: Selected Gender Equality Indicators — India (2022-2024)

Indicator	India (Data Point)	Global / Regional Benchmark
Global Gender Gap Index Rank (WEF 2023)	127th out of 146 countries	Global average: ~68% parity achieved
Female Labour Force Participation Rate (ILO 2023)	~37%	Global average: ~47%; male LFPR India: ~77%
Gender Wage Gap (ILO estimate)	Women earn ~34% less than men	Global average gap: ~20%; Asia-Pacific: ~17%
Women in Lok Sabha (2024 elections)	74 of 543 MPs (~13.6%)	Global average: ~26.9% (IPU 2024)
Women in State Cabinets (national average)	~9% of cabinet ministers	Global average: ~22.8% (UN Women 2023)
Crimes Against Women (NCRB 2022)	4,45,256 cases reported	Estimated actual incidence significantly higher due to under-reporting
Women Judges — Supreme Court of India (2024)	3 of 34 judges (~8.8%)	Global average: ~30% (IDLO 2024)
Child Sex Ratio (Census 2011)	914 girls per 1,000 boys (0-6 yrs)	Natural ratio: 943-954 girls per 1,000 boys

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