



## Women as Architects of Change: Women's Strategic Agency and the Dialectical Reconfiguration of Gendered Institutions

\*<sup>1</sup>Ramandeep Kaur

\*<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Guru Nanak College: An Autonomous, Budhlada, Punjabi University, Patiala, Punjab, India.

### Abstract

This paper reconceptualizes women as *architects of change*, whose strategic agency functions as a constitutive force in the dialectical reconfiguration of gendered institutions. Despite global commitments to gender equality under Sustainable Development Goal 5, structural inequalities persist. The World Economic Forum (2025) reports 68.8% global gender parity, yet women remain underrepresented in parliamentary (26.9%) and ministerial (21%) positions. In India, disparities are reflected in a 37% female labour force participation rate (PLFS 2023–24), concentration of 81.8% women workers in the informal sector, and significant prevalence of gender-based violence (NFHS-5: 29.3%). Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power, Raewyn Connell's gender regimes, and Naila Kabeer's empowerment framework, this study employs qualitative thematic analysis of secondary datasets, policy reports, and Scopus-indexed literature (2015–2025). The analysis identifies five interconnected domains of women's strategic agency: economic participation, political leadership, institutional negotiation, cultural transformation, and psycho-social empowerment.

The study develops a dialectical agency–structure model, arguing that gendered institutions are not fixed structures but contested fields where women's strategic action produces transformative change. It further reconceptualizes agency as generative and structural rather than adaptive or residual.

The paper concludes that achieving substantive gender equality requires institutional recognition of women's strategic agency as a central mechanism of social transformation, enabling redistribution of resources, reconfiguration of norms, and democratization of governance in alignment with SDG-5.

**Keywords:** Women, Architects of Change, Strategic agency; Gendered institutions; Institutional institutionalism; SDG-5; India; Social transformation; Push factor; Constitutive agency.

### Introduction

Gender equality, institutionalized within United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5, remains shaped by a persistent dialectic between formal advancement and structural inertia. While constitutional guarantees, anti-discrimination legislation, and gender-responsive policy mechanisms have expanded considerably, substantive equality continues to be constrained by deeply embedded institutional formations. Gendered institutions reproduce asymmetries of power through symbolic domination, cultural schemas, organizational hierarchies, and routinized practices that normalize unequal distributions of authority, resources, and recognition. The contemporary gender order is therefore characterized not by the absence of reform, but by the limited transformative reach of reform within historically sedimented structures.

Sociological inquiry has long documented the durability of such arrangements. Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of symbolic violence demonstrates how domination persists through the misrecognition of historically contingent hierarchies as legitimate social order. Power becomes most effective when it

is internalized as common sense, reproduced through habitus, and embedded within everyday classificatory systems. Raewyn Connell extends this insight through the concept of gender regimes, showing how institutions organize patterned relations of power, production, emotion, and representation. Bureaucratic routines, occupational pathways, and leadership hierarchies thus become vehicles through which masculinized norms are stabilized and reproduced over time. Within these frameworks, inequality appears self-reinforcing: institutional logics discipline actors, while actors' habituated practices reproduce institutional logics.

Although analytically powerful, this structural emphasis generates a significant theoretical and political dilemma. If institutions secure continuity through embodied dispositions, normative legitimacy, and path-dependent routines, by what mechanisms does transformation occur? How are entrenched gender orders unsettled, revised, or displaced? Feminist scholarship, most notably Naila Kabeer's empowerment framework, reintroduces agency by emphasizing women's capacity to define goals, exercise strategic choice, and act upon those choices. Yet many empirical applications continue

to treat agency as external to institutions—measured as an outcome following reform—rather than as a constitutive force operating within institutional life itself. This paper intervenes in that conceptual gap by positioning women as architects of change. It argues that gendered institutions should not be understood as monolithic structures of constraint, but as dialectical terrains in which reproduction and reconfiguration coexist. Institutions constrain action, yet they are simultaneously vulnerable to reinterpretation, contestation, and redesign. Women's strategic agency—defined here as purposive, reflexive, and relational action oriented toward transforming institutional rules, cultural scripts, and resource distributions—constitutes a primary mechanism through which such change unfolds. Agency, in this sense, is not residual to structure; it is generative of new institutional possibilities.

To develop this argument, the paper constructs a dialectical framework specifying how strategic action interacts with institutional properties to produce both incremental and systemic transformation. Drawing on qualitative synthesis across institutional sociology, feminist theory, and development studies, the analysis identifies the modalities through which women contest symbolic hierarchies, negotiate organizational boundaries, reconstruct governance practices, and reframe dominant narratives of authority. Gender equality is therefore reconceptualized not merely as a policy target or representational metric, but as a process of institutional authorship in which women act as central producers of social change.

This reconceptualization carries implications beyond gender scholarship alone. It contributes to contemporary institutional theory by demonstrating how historically marginalized actors exercise transformative capacity within path-dependent systems. It further provides a sociological basis for operationalizing SDG-5 beyond inclusion indicators toward substantive institutional transformation. The sections that follow elaborate the theoretical framework, methodological approach, and principal domains through which women's strategic agency reconfigures gendered institutions.

### Symbolic Power and Cultural Reproduction

Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (2001), the concept of symbolic power provides a critical lens for understanding the persistence of gender inequality. Symbolic power operates through the production and legitimization of meanings that render social hierarchies natural and unquestioned. Gendered domination is sustained not only through material structures but also through “doxa”—taken-for-granted beliefs embedded in everyday practices and cultural norms.

Through processes of socialization within the family, education system, and media, gender roles are internalized and reproduced across generations. This process of cultural reproduction ensures that inequality is not merely externally imposed but becomes embodied within individual dispositions (*habitus*). Consequently, formal legal equality often coexists with informal normative constraints, explaining the resilience of gendered institutions despite progressive policy reforms.

### Gender Regimes and Institutional Structures

The framework further incorporates R. W. Connell's (2009) concept of gender regimes, which refers to the patterned organization of gender relations within institutions such as the labor market, political systems, and the household. Gender regimes operate through interconnected dimensions, including

power relations, production relations, emotional relations, and symbolic relations.

These institutional arrangements systematically structure access to resources, opportunities, and authority. For instance, labor markets often segregate women into low-paid or informal sectors, while political institutions limit their participation in decision-making processes. Importantly, gender regimes are not static; they are sites of contestation characterized by internal contradictions. Such “crisis tendencies” create openings for transformation, particularly when women enter traditionally male-dominated domains, thereby destabilizing existing institutional logics.

### Empowerment as Strategic Agency

Building on Naila Kabeer's (1999) framework, empowerment is conceptualized as a multidimensional process involving resources, agency, and achievements. While resources provide the enabling conditions and achievements represent outcomes, agency constitutes the central transformative element.

This study advances the concept of strategic agency, defined as collective, purposive, and contextually embedded action aimed at transforming structural constraints. Unlike individual-level decision-making or adaptive coping strategies, strategic agency involves deliberate efforts to renegotiate institutional rules, redistribute resources, and challenge dominant cultural narratives. It is inherently relational and political, operating within and against existing power structures.

### Dialectical Agency–Structure Model

Integrating these perspectives, the study proposes a dialectical agency–structure model to explain processes of gender transformation. In this model, gendered institutions function as both constraints and sites of negotiation, while women's strategic agency acts as a transformative force.

The dialectical relationship can be summarized as follows:

- **Structural Constraints:** Institutional arrangements, cultural norms, and symbolic power limit access to resources and opportunities.
- **Strategic Agency:** Women engage in collective and purposive actions to contest, negotiate, and reshape these constraints.
- **Transformative Outcomes:** Through sustained interaction, institutional logics are reconfigured, leading to shifts in power relations, norms, and resource distribution.

This model emphasizes that transformation is not linear but emerges through continuous interaction between structure and agency across multiple levels (macro, meso, and micro). It resolves the traditional structure–agency impasse by demonstrating that women are neither fully constrained nor entirely free, but active participants in the ongoing reconstitution of gendered social orders.

### Research Methodology

#### Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative research design grounded in feminist epistemology, which emphasizes the situated nature of knowledge and foregrounds women's lived experiences and agency in the analysis of social structures. The research is theory-driven and analytically oriented, aiming to examine the dialectical relationship between

gendered institutions and women's strategic agency across multiple levels of social organization.

### Data Sources

The analysis is based on secondary data triangulation, integrating multiple categories of sources to ensure analytical depth and validity:

- **International Reports:** World Economic Forum (2025), global gender assessments
- **National Datasets (India):** Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS, 2023–24), National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21)
- **Scholarly Literature:** Peer-reviewed, Scopus-indexed journal articles (2020–2025) focusing on gender, agency, and institutional transformation
- **Policy Documents:** Government reports and gender-related policy frameworks

This multi-source approach enables a comparative and contextualized understanding of gender inequality and transformation processes.

### Analytical Strategy

The study employs thematic content analysis to systematically examine patterns across data sources. The analysis proceeds through three interrelated stages:

- i). Identification of Structural Constraints across macro, meso, and micro levels
- ii). Classification of Forms of Strategic Agency manifested by women
- iii). Mapping of Transformative Outcomes emerging from the interaction between structure and agency

A multilevel analytical framework (macro–meso–micro) is utilized to capture the complexity of institutional dynamics and to link individual experiences with broader structural processes. This approach facilitates a dialectical interpretation, aligning empirical findings with the theoretical framework.

### Gendered Institutions and Structural Constraints

Gender inequality persists through the interlocking operation of institutional structures and cultural norms, which reproduce unequal power relations across different domains of society.

**Macro-Level Constraints: Policy and Economic Structures:** At the macro level, gendered inequalities are embedded within state policies, labor markets, and economic systems. Despite formal commitments to equality, persistent wage gaps, occupational segregation, and limited representation in leadership positions continue to marginalize women.

Labor market structures disproportionately channel women into informal, low-paid, and insecure employment, reflecting systemic undervaluation of feminized labor. Furthermore, policy frameworks often exhibit an implementation gap, where legal provisions fail to translate into substantive equality due to institutional inertia and socio-cultural resistance.

**Meso-Level Constraints: Organizational and Cultural Systems:** At the meso level, gender regimes operate through organizational practices, educational systems, and media representations. Workplace norms frequently reinforce gender hierarchies through unequal opportunities, lack of supportive infrastructure, and implicit biases.

Educational and media institutions contribute to cultural reproduction, perpetuating stereotypical representations of gender roles. These systems normalize the “double burden” of paid and unpaid work for women, thereby limiting their access to professional advancement and leadership roles.

**Micro-Level Constraints: Household and Socialization Processes:** At the micro level, gender inequality is reproduced within household dynamics and everyday social interactions. Unequal division of labor, mobility restrictions, and decision-making hierarchies constrain women's autonomy.

Additionally, internalized norms and psychological conditioning play a crucial role in sustaining inequality. Women may internalize subordinate roles, leading to reduced self-efficacy and limited aspirations. These micro-level processes reinforce and stabilize macro-level structures, highlighting the interconnected nature of gendered institutions. Analysis of Gendered Disparities: Economic, Social, and Institutional Perspectives. This section critically examines the reproduction of gendered inequalities across economic, educational, political, and cultural domains, demonstrating how gendered institutions operate through interconnected structural and normative mechanisms. The analysis reveals that persistent disparities are not merely the result of inadequate policy frameworks, but are deeply rooted in institutional logics, symbolic power, and socio-cultural practices that normalize and sustain gender hierarchies.

By situating these inequalities within a multilevel framework, the section underscores the structural conditions that necessitate women's strategic agency as a transformative force capable of reconfiguring institutional arrangements and redistributing power.

**Economic Inequality and Structural Exclusion:** Economic inequality constitutes a foundational dimension of gendered institutional reproduction. Despite policy advancements aimed at promoting inclusion, structural exclusion persists across labor markets, resource distribution, and asset ownership.

Globally, women earn approximately 20% less than men for work of equal value, while the burden of unpaid care work remains 3.2 times higher for women (International Labour Organization, 2022; World Economic Forum, 2025). In India, female labor force participation remains significantly lower at 35–37% compared to approximately 76% for men (PLFS, 2023–24).

A substantial proportion of women's employment is concentrated in the informal sector, with 81.8% of employed women lacking access to social security and formal protections, while only 18.2% are engaged in regular salaried employment. Wage disparities remain pronounced, with a 29.2% gender wage gap in rural casual labor and 16.7% in urban regular employment (Government of India, 2024).

Furthermore, limited asset ownership—only around 14% of women owning land—restricts economic autonomy and bargaining power, reinforcing dependency within households and markets. These patterns reflect entrenched institutional biases that systematically devalue women's labor and constrain their economic agency, thereby sustaining broader structures of inequality.

**Educational Disparities and Unequal Human Capital Formation:** While India has achieved near parity in primary education (approximately 95%), disparities widen significantly at higher levels, indicating structural leakages in the educational system.

The gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education stands at 27.9% for women compared to 30.5% for men, while participation in STEM fields remains markedly unequal. Globally, women account for only 28% of STEM students and approximately 14% of researchers (UNESCO, 2023).

In the Indian context, socio-cultural norms and gendered expectations continue to shape educational trajectories. Approximately 23% of rural households perceive girls' education as unnecessary, while 38% cite early marriage as a key reason for discontinuation (ASER, 2022).

These disparities restrict women's access to high-skilled and high-paying occupations, reinforcing occupational segregation and limiting long-term socio-economic mobility. As a result, educational inequality functions as a critical mechanism in the reproduction of gendered economic and institutional hierarchies.

**Political Underrepresentation and Institutional Doxa:** The persistent underrepresentation of women in political institutions reflects the continuity of gendered power structures within governance systems.

Globally, women occupy 26.9% of parliamentary seats and 21% of ministerial positions (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). In India, although the 33% reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions has increased women's participation at the local level to approximately 46%, representation at the national level remains limited, with only 14.4% of Lok Sabha members being women.

Moreover, 44% of elected women representatives report interference from male family members, highlighting the persistence of proxy leadership and patriarchal control (UN Women India, 2023).

This phenomenon reflects what can be conceptualized as institutional doxa, where formal inclusion does not translate into substantive power. Consequently, gendered institutions continue to reproduce inequality by maintaining symbolic legitimacy alongside structural exclusion.

**Gender-Based Violence as a Mechanism of Structural Control:** Gender-based violence (GBV) operates as both a material and symbolic mechanism of control, reinforcing gender hierarchies and restricting women's agency.

Data from NFHS-5 indicate that 29.3% of women aged 18–49 in India have experienced spousal violence, while 3.1% have faced sexual violence (IIPS & ICF, 2021). Notably, only 14% of survivors seek institutional or social support, reflecting normalization and systemic underreporting.

At the global level, one in three women experiences physical or sexual violence during her lifetime (World Health Organization, 2021). Economic dependency further intensifies vulnerability, as 57% of women without independent income justify spousal violence compared to 42% among economically independent women. Such patterns demonstrate that violence is not an isolated phenomenon but an institutionalized mechanism that limits mobility, labor participation, and public engagement, thereby reinforcing structural inequalities.

**Cultural Norms, Socialization, and Symbolic Reproduction:** Cultural norms and socialization processes play a central role in the symbolic reproduction of gender inequality, embedding hierarchical relations within everyday practices and belief systems.

NFHS-5 data reveal that 52% of women and 42% of men justify wife-beating under certain circumstances, indicating the deep internalization of patriarchal norms. Son preference remains evident, with a sex ratio at birth of 929 females per 1000 males (Government of India, 2021).

Time-use surveys further demonstrate that women spend 5.6 hours per day on unpaid domestic work, compared to 0.9 hours for men, reinforcing the normative expectation of women as primary caregivers (ILO, 2018).

Media representation also reflects symbolic inequality, with women appearing as central figures in only 23% of Indian news narratives, thereby limiting visibility and reinforcing gender stereotypes (Global Media Monitoring Project, 2020).

These processes sustain symbolic reproduction, where gender inequality is normalized, legitimized, and transmitted across generations, making structural transformation particularly resistant to change.

**Analytical Synthesis: Structural Reproduction and the Imperative of Strategic Agency:** Taken together, the findings demonstrate that gender inequality is structurally embedded, culturally reinforced, and institutionally reproduced across multiple levels of social organization. The persistence of these disparities highlights the limitations of policy-centric approaches that fail to address the underlying normative and institutional foundations of inequality.

In this context, women's strategic agency emerges as a critical transformative force, capable of disrupting entrenched norms, renegotiating power relations, and reconfiguring gendered institutions. Transformation, therefore, is not solely dependent on structural reform but requires the active engagement of women as agents of change, operating across economic, political, and cultural domains.

## Women as Agents of Transformation: Institutional Reconfiguration and Structural Change Strategic Direction

### 1. Self-Recognition of Inner Power and Capability

The first stage of transformation begins when women recognize their own competence, dignity, and agency. Across societies, women perform complex labour such as caregiving, budgeting, emotional management, multitasking, and community coordination, yet patriarchal systems often treat these as natural duties rather than productive skills. Pierre Bourdieu described this as symbolic domination, where inequality becomes normalized (Bourdieu, 2001). Empowerment starts when women reinterpret everyday labour as evidence of leadership and capability rather than obligation. Naila Kabeer defines empowerment as gaining the ability to make strategic life choices (Kabeer, 1999). Women with stronger self-efficacy are more likely to lead, innovate, and participate in decision-making (Bandura, 1997).

### Strategic Direction

- Leadership circles and mentoring platforms
- Confidence, identity, and public voice training
- Recognition of unpaid labour as transferable skill
- Community campaigns celebrating invisible contributions
- Intergenerational role-model networks

### 2. Education as the Gateway to Transformation

Education remains the strongest structural predictor of women's advancement. It increases literacy, professional skills, health awareness, civic participation, and bargaining power. Research shows that higher female education is linked with lower fertility, improved maternal health, delayed marriage, and higher workforce participation (Jayachandran, 2015). According to UNESCO, each additional year of schooling significantly raises women's future earnings and child wellbeing (UNESCO, 2024). Amartya Sen argues

education expands substantive freedoms and life opportunities (Sen, 1999). Modern empowerment requires entry into STEM, AI, governance, entrepreneurship, and lifelong learning systems.

#### Strategic Direction

- Universal secondary and higher education for girls
- Scholarships in STEM, law, and governance
- Safe transport and hostels for rural girls
- Adult literacy and re-entry education systems
- Digital literacy and lifelong learning

### 3. Economic Independence and Financial Authority

Economic autonomy transforms women's bargaining power within households and society. Women with independent income exercise greater control over fertility, mobility, and family decisions. World Bank reports that legal and economic barriers continue to restrict women's access to employment, property, and entrepreneurship (World Bank, 2024). International Labour Organization notes that reducing gender employment gaps would substantially increase national productivity (ILO, 2024). However, employment alone is insufficient. Lasting empowerment requires authority over assets such as savings, land, pensions, housing, and investments.

#### Strategic Direction:

- Expand women's employment in high-growth sectors
- Entrepreneurship support through credit and incubation
- Investment, pension, and insurance literacy
- Equal inheritance and land rights
- Universal access to digital banking systems

### 4. Enter Leadership and Decision-Making Spaces

Transformation remains incomplete unless women move from participation to power. Women leaders reshape institutional priorities, governance quality, and development outcomes. A landmark Indian study by Raghavendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo found that women leaders invested more in water, roads, and education (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). World Economic Forum data show countries with stronger female representation perform better on governance and competitiveness indicators (WEF, 2025).

#### Strategic Direction

- Encourage women to contest elections
- Increase women in judiciary, bureaucracy, universities
- Leadership academies for young women
- Executive mentorship pipelines
- Normalize women's authority in institutions

### 5. Develop Voice, Communication, and Public Presence

Many capable women remain under-recognized because patriarchal socialization often discourages public speaking, negotiation, and authority claims. Voice functions as symbolic power because those who speak confidently shape agendas, influence institutions, and gain recognition (Pierre Bourdieu, 2001). When women remain silent in workplaces, politics, media, and community forums, gender hierarchies are more easily reproduced.

Labour-market research shows that communication, leadership, persuasion, and networking skills significantly influence wages, promotions, and career mobility. The World Economic Forum *Future of Jobs Report 2025* identifies

leadership, social influence, collaboration, and communication among the most valuable future skills in the global economy (WEF, 2025). Studies by McKinsey & Company (2024) also note that women with stronger visibility, sponsorship, and communication skills are more likely to reach senior leadership positions.

Women who strengthen debating ability, salary negotiation capacity, networking presence, and media confidence are more likely to convert competence into authority. Public visibility also creates role models for younger generations and challenges stereotypes that leadership belongs primarily to men (UN Women, 2024). In the digital era, it is a strategic asset linked to income, leadership, and institutional power.

#### Strategic Direction

- Debate, speech, and negotiation training from school to university level
- Salary negotiation and promotion advocacy skills
- Media visibility, digital branding, and professional presence
- Leadership coaching and executive communication training
- Strong networking in business, academia, governance, and civil society
- Encourage women's participation in panels, conferences, and policy forums
- Use digital platforms for influence, learning, and career growth
- Normalize women's authority voices in institutions and families

### 6. Build Sisterhood and Collective Strength

Build Sisterhood and Collective Strength - Individual advancement matters, but durable transformation is collective. Self-help groups, cooperatives, unions, and professional networks convert isolated women into a coordinated force that rewrites institutions. The World Bank finds SHGs "promote social cohesion" and increase bargaining power in labor markets, with members more likely to participate in household decisions, engage in civic activities, and access public entitlements like MGNREGA. IFPRI evidence shows SHG members are more likely to vote of their own accord, attend gram sabhas, and believe the panchayat will act on women's suggestions — "confidence in women's collective power". They are also more likely to know and interact with other women, talk about health and nutrition, and need less permission to attend village meetings, expanding mobility and political agency. Cooperatives multiply this effect. The ILO confirms cooperatives create jobs and increase income for women workers, improve livelihoods through basic services, and boost women's leadership. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stated: "Through membership in cooperatives, women are developing self-help strategies, generating their own income and assets, and learning how to overcome entrenched biases". In India, women-only cooperatives like SEWA and Amul demonstrate that collective models deliver financial literacy, entrepreneurship skills, savings, and household incomes, plus access to banking, housing, health, and childcare. India's 10 million+ SHGs under the SHG-Bank Linkage Programme empower women by facilitating entrepreneurial activities, market access, and technical skills — core to sustainable livelihoods.

#### Strategic Direction

- Build cooperatives and professional networks

- Mentor first-generation learners
- Share jobs and market information
- Create legal and emotional support circles

### 7. Strategically Challenge Restrictive Norms

Women's advancement is frequently constrained by deeply rooted norms such as early marriage, son preference, mobility restrictions, dowry expectations, and unequal unpaid care burdens. UN Women (2024) reports that women globally spend around 2.5 times more time on unpaid care and domestic work than men, reducing opportunities for education, income, and leadership. UNICEF estimates that more than 640 million women alive today were married as children, which is strongly associated with lower schooling and economic dependence. World Bank (2024) notes that restrictive gender norms continue to limit women's labour-force participation and asset ownership in many societies. Sustainable transformation therefore requires replacing hierarchy with partnership, obedience with dignity, and exclusion with equal citizenship. Norm change inside families often becomes the foundation for wider institutional change.

#### Strategic Direction

- Reject discriminatory customs such as dowry, son preference, and child marriage
- Normalize equal sharing of cooking, caregiving, and household labour
- Promote dignity-based marriages founded on consent and partnership
- Ensure girls' equal education, nutrition, inheritance, and mobility rights
- Engage men and boys as allies in gender-equality programs
- Use schools, media, and religion/community leaders to reshape attitudes
- Enforce laws against child marriage, violence, and discrimination
- Reward families and communities practicing gender equality
- Encourage women's participation in family financial and life decisions
- Build community dialogue platforms for peaceful norm transformation

8. Technology has become one of the most powerful instruments of women's advancement across every sphere of life. It is no longer limited to communication; it now shapes education, employment, finance, healthcare, entrepreneurship, governance, safety, and personal growth. Women who effectively use technology gain access to online learning, professional skills, remote work, e-commerce, digital banking, telemedicine, networking platforms, and leadership opportunities that were once restricted by geography or social barriers.

The GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report (2025) shows women in many developing regions still have lower internet access than men, while International Telecommunication Union (2024) reports continuing global gender gaps in digital inclusion. This means digital inequality increasingly reproduces social and economic inequality.

Technology can empower women as students, professionals, mothers, entrepreneurs, farmers, leaders, and citizens. It enables access to market prices, health advice, government

schemes, safety apps, investment tools, and global knowledge networks. Women must therefore move beyond passive use and become creators, innovators, and decision-makers in the digital world.

#### Strategic Direction:

- Use technology for education, careers, and lifelong learning
- Adopt digital banking, investment, and business tools
- Use healthcare, safety, and e-governance apps
- Learn AI, coding, and future-ready skills
- Build confidence as digital leaders and innovators

### 9. Prioritize Health, Confidence, and Personal Growth

Women's transformation requires shifting health, confidence, and personal growth from individual concerns to institutional priorities that reshape power structures. Health sovereignty is essential for agency; universal access to reproductive healthcare, mental health services, and digital safety systems ensures bodily integrity as a condition for civic participation (World Bank, 2024). Confidence must be institutionalised through mentorship networks, leadership training, and equitable media representation to dismantle symbolic domination and normalise women's authority (Ridgeway & Correll, 2023). Capability acceleration through digital literacy, financial education, and entrepreneurship training converts personal development into economic and governance power (Laszlo *et al.*, 2023). Time and care redistribution is equally critical, as unpaid care work produces chronic time poverty; therefore, public care infrastructure and flexible work systems are necessary to enable equal participation (Kabeer, 2021). Finally, epistemic authorship requires women to move from beneficiaries to knowledge producers through digital platforms, research, and policy advocacy, positioning them as architects of development discourse (Pathak & Mishra, 2024; Zimmermann, 2023). Health, confidence, and personal growth operate as generative forces of structural transformation, enabling women to move from adaptation to inequality toward active redesign of institutions, redistribution of resources, and democratization of governance (Waylen, 2022).

#### Strategic Direction:

- Ensure universal access to reproductive and mental healthcare with digital safety support.
- Build mentorship, leadership training, and public speaking platforms for women.
- Strengthen digital literacy, AI skills, financial education, and entrepreneurship training.
- Expand childcare, care infrastructure, and flexible work to reduce time poverty.
- Recognize and reduce unpaid care work through supportive policies.
- Increase women's participation in research, innovation, and policymaking.
- Promote women as digital knowledge creators and leaders, not just users.
- Ensure safe online spaces through strong cybersecurity and protection systems.

### 10. Role Modelling as Intergenerational Structural Transformation

Role modelling is a powerful mechanism of intergenerational change through which women's strategic agency reshapes

gender norms, legitimises female authority, and expands the aspirations of future generations. The absence of visible women in leadership reinforces what Pierre Bourdieu calls *doxa*—the belief that public power is naturally masculine (Bourdieu, 2001). Empirical evidence confirms this effect: Chattopadhyay & Duflo (2004) found that women leaders in panchayats significantly increased girls' educational aspirations and improved gender equality in schooling outcomes. Yet global representation remains limited, with women holding only 26.9% of parliamentary seats and 21% of ministerial positions (WEF, 2025), and female labour force participation in India at around 37% (PLFS, 2024). These gaps themselves act as structural push factors for reform.

#### Strategic Direction

- Ensure strong women's representation in governance through reservation and leadership pipelines
- Institutionalise media, textbook, and digital parity for women experts and professionals
- Develop mentorship ecosystems in schools, communities, and workplaces
- Promote women as knowledge producers in research, policy, and innovation
- Strengthen visibility of women entrepreneurs and leaders through economic support systems

### 11. Master Financial Power and Wealth Creation

#### Master Financial Power and Wealth Creation

Income alone rarely produces real empowerment because without ownership it remains unstable and dependent. True and durable power emerges only when women move from earning to owning and controlling assets such as land, housing, savings, pensions, investments, and business capital. When women lack ownership, they remain structurally vulnerable to economic shocks, family dependency, and limited decision-making power, which continuously pushes them toward inequality. In contrast, asset control transforms women from passive participants into economic decision-makers and institutional actors. The International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2024) highlights that women's financial inclusion is directly linked with stronger national growth, stability, and economic resilience. This makes financial empowerment not only an individual need but a structural necessity for development.

#### Strategic Direction

- Prioritize women's ownership of land, housing, and productive assets
- Expand access to credit, banking, and digital investment systems
- Promote women-led enterprises and long-term wealth creation models
- Strengthen financial literacy in savings, insurance, and investment planning
- Ensure institutional support for women's economic independence and security

### 12. Enter Law, Governance, and Policy Spaces

Long-term transformation requires women inside institutions that create laws and allocate resources. Inter-Parliamentary Union reports that women remain underrepresented in legislatures worldwide (IPU, 2025). Representation in governance is not symbolic inclusion—it is structural redistribution of power.

#### Strategic Direction

- Careers in judiciary, diplomacy, and civil services
- Contest elections and local governance roles
- Join commissions and think tanks
- Promote women judges and administrators
- Leadership pipelines for young women

### 13. Build Global Competence and International Exposure

In a global economy, women's advancement increasingly depends on cross-border competence. Language skills, international certifications, intercultural communication, and digital networking improve mobility and career opportunity. OECD emphasizes adaptability and collaboration as key labour-market skills (OECD, 2024).

#### Strategic Direction

- Learn English and global communication
- Join exchange programs and conferences
- Build professional digital presence
- Pursue international certifications
- Enter remote and cross-border work

### 14. Strengthen Time Management and Strategic Discipline

Time is a hidden but powerful dimension of gender inequality, because women's strategic agency is continuously constrained by disproportionate unpaid care and domestic responsibilities that reduce their access to education, rest, income generation, and leadership opportunities. Globally, women perform around 76.2% of unpaid care work, spending 2–4 additional hours daily compared to men (ILO, 2023; UN Women, 2024), and reclaiming even one hour of this time can create cumulative advantages in learning, skill development, income creation, and leadership participation. In India, female labour force participation remains around 37% (PLFS, 2024), where time poverty acts as a structural barrier to entry into markets, governance, and ownership systems, while 81.8% of women workers remain in the unorganised sector without security or rest (PLFS, 2024), making disciplined use of limited time essential for survival and upward mobility. From a structural perspective, scarcity of time itself becomes a push factor that forces institutional change toward care infrastructure, flexible work systems, and recognition of unpaid labour (Kabeer, 2021). Every disciplined hour converts invisibility into visibility, dependency into capability, and survival into advancement. Strategic discipline is not self-management—it is system transformation in action. It forces structures to adjust to women's presence, not women to adjust to exclusion. When women control time, they do not only change their lives—they expand the limits of society itself.

#### Strategic Direction:

- Daily schedules for learning and growth
- Prioritize long-term goals
- Use planners and productivity tools
- Reserve time for reading and health
- Negotiate redistribution of household labour

### 15. Negotiate Instead of Merely Adjusting

Many women are socialized to adjust silently rather than negotiate fairly. This reduces wages, mobility, and recognition. Research from McKinsey & Company and Harvard Business Review shows negotiation strongly affects

salary growth and leadership progression. Negotiation is not conflict—it is claiming fair value and equal treatment.

Negotiate Instead of Merely Adjusting - Many women are socialized to adjust silently rather than negotiate fairly, which depresses wages, mobility, and recognition. In India, 23% of salaried women in metros perceive a gender pay gap and 16% report gender bias at their workplace. 42% of salaried women in metros face challenges while negotiating salaries, with stark regional differences: 96% of women in Kolkata report no difficulty, while only 33% in Ahmedabad feel the same. Affluent women earning ₹41–55 lakh annually report higher perceptions of both pay gap and bias at 30%, versus 18% and 12% among semi-affluent women earning ₹10–25 lakh. [business-standard.com](https://www.business-standard.com) Yet Indian women are negotiating more than global peers. Indeed's 2024 'Promoting Women for Better Work' report shows 65% of Indian women have asked for a raise — the highest globally — and 53% are confident asking, vs a 30% global average. 90% of Indian women identify pay as the most important aspect of their jobs, above the 82% global average. However, 56% who asked for raises were granted less than requested, and 28% of working women in India are not satisfied with their salary vs 22% of men. Research from Harvard Business Review shows negotiation strongly affects salary growth and leadership progression, but women face backlash for self-advocating because it violates stereotypes of women as “accommodating and communal”. A meta-analysis including India found women outperform men in negotiations when they know the bargaining range, have experience, or negotiate for others. Negotiation is not conflict. It is claiming fair value and equal treatment, especially as demand for women executives grows: women senior leaders switching firms get a 25% salary bump on average vs 9% for men, with women in male-dominated fields seeing increases up to 40.5%

### Strategic Direction

- Negotiate salaries and promotions confidently
- Demand equal domestic responsibilities
- Assert clear personal boundaries
- Request mentorship and leadership opportunities
- Replace silence with evidence-based communication

### Conclusion

The core argument of this paper is that women's agency functions as a *push force of institutional change*, emerging directly from conditions of exclusion. Economic marginalisation, time poverty, political underrepresentation, digital gaps, and cultural constraints do not only suppress women—they also generate the pressure for transformation. When women convert these constraints into strategic action through education, financial autonomy, digital participation, leadership entry, and collective mobilisation, institutions are compelled to adapt, reform, and restructure. Integrating Bourdieu's symbolic power, Connell's gender regimes, and Kabeer's empowerment framework, this study demonstrates that structure and agency operate in a dialectical relationship where transformation is continuously produced through interaction rather than external reform alone. Evidence further confirms that women's entry into decision-making improves governance quality, social investment, and developmental outcomes. The study concludes that when women strategically mobilize health, confidence, education, time, technology, and financial power, they move beyond adaptation and become *designers of institutions themselves*. Women's strategic agency thus emerges as the decisive

engine for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 and for constructing more equitable, democratic, and inclusive social orders.

### References

1. Bourdieu P. *Masculine domination*. Nice R, translator. Stanford: Stanford University Press; 2001.
2. Chattopadhyay R, Duflo E. Women as policy makers: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India. *Econometrica*. 2004;72(5):1409–1443.
3. Connell RW. *Gender: In world perspective*. 2nd ed. Polity Press; 2009.
4. Desai S, Jain D. Women's employment in India: Trends and patterns. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 2019;54(32):45–52.
5. Donald A, Koolwal G, Annan J, Falb K, Goldstein M. Measuring women's agency: New insights from longitudinal data. *World Development*. 2024;173:106412.
6. Government of India. *Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) annual report 2023–24*. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation; 2024.
7. International Institute for Population Sciences. *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019–21: India report*. IIPS; 2021.
8. International Labour Organization. *Global wage report 2022–23: The impact of inflation and COVID-19 on wages and purchasing power*. ILO; 2023.
9. International Labour Organization. *Global wage report 2024–25: Inequality and wages in times of crisis*. ILO; 2024.
10. Jayachandran S. The roots of gender inequality in developing countries. *Annual Review of Economics*. 2015;7:63–88.
11. Kabeer N. Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*. 1999;30(3):435–464.
12. Kabeer N. Gender equality, inclusive growth, and the SDGs: Beyond instrumentalism. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*. 2021;22(1):1–22.
13. Kumar A, Rao S. Self-help groups and intergenerational transmission of gender norms in rural India. *Journal of Development Studies*. 2023;59(4):512–528.
14. Laszlo S, Grantham K, Oskay C, Zhang T. Financial inclusion and women's strategic agency: Evidence from randomized trials. *Feminist Economics*. 2023;29(2):1–28.
15. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019–21: India report*. International Institute for Population Sciences; 2022. (Note: This source shares the same primary content title as #7 but is published/distributed by a different body/year).
16. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. *Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS): Annual report 2023–24*. Government of India; 2024. (Note: This is a variant entry of #6).
17. Ministry of Women and Child Development. *Women's Reservation Act, 2023 (Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam)*. Government of India; 2023.
18. Molyneux M. Gender justice, citizenship and development. *Third World Quarterly*. 2022;43(3):521–537.
19. Nazneen S, Hickey S. Negotiating gendered institutions: Women's political agency in hybrid regimes. *Development and Change*. 2023;54(2):267–291.

20. NITI Aayog. *SDG India index & dashboard 2023–24: Partnerships in the decade of action*. Government of India; 2023.
21. Pathak N, Mishra SK. Digital feminism and counter-narratives in India: A case of strategic agency. *New Media & Society*. 2024;26(1):112–130.
22. Raj A, Boehmer U. Measuring gender empowerment: Multidimensional approaches for SDG-5. *Social Indicators Research*. 2023;165(2):401–425.
23. Rao N. Caste, class, and gender: Intersectional agency in rural India. *Gender & Society*. 2022;36(4):501–526.
24. Richardson R, Schmitz N, Harper S, Nandi A. Development of a tool to measure women's agency in India. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*. 2019;20(1):26–53.
25. Ridgeway CL. *Framed by gender: How gender inequality persists in the modern world*. Oxford University Press; 2011.
26. Ridgeway CL, Correll SJ. Status, networks, and gender inequality: New directions. *Annual Review of Sociology*. 2023;49:87–106.
27. Sen G, Mukherjee A. Epistemic agency and feminist knowledge production in the Global South. *Feminist Theory*. 2024;25(1):3–21.
28. Singha R, Singha S. Gendered governance: Exploring feminist visions for the state. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. 2024.
29. Stromquist NP. Gender structure and women's agency: Toward greater theoretical understanding of education for transformation. *International Review of Education*. 2015;61(5):657–675.
30. Sweetman C. Gender and development: Agency, institutions, and transformation. *Gender & Development*. 2023;31(1):1–15.
31. United Nations. *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. United Nations; 2015.
32. UN Women. *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The gender snapshot 2024*. United Nations; 2024.
33. UNESCO. *Global education monitoring report 2024: Gender report*. UNESCO Publishing; 2024.
34. United Nations Development Programme. *Human development report 2024: Breaking the gridlock*. UNDP; 2024.
35. Varshney LR. Towards social justice in institutions of higher learning: Addressing gender inequality in science and technology through capability approach. *Administrative Sciences*. 2017;7(3):22.
36. Waylen G. Gendering political economy: Institutions, agency and change. *New Political Economy*. 2022;27(4):551–565.
37. World Bank. *Women, business and the law 2024*. World Bank Group; 2024.
38. World Economic Forum. *Global gender gap report 2025*. World Economic Forum; 2025.
39. Yount KM, Krause KH, Miedema SS. Measuring women's empowerment in the SDG era: A critical review. *SSM - Population Health*. 2024;25:101598.
40. Zimmermann A. Digital sisterhood: Social media and collective agency among young women. *Information, Communication & Society*. 2023;26(8):1456–1472.
41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2020.1861074>
42. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2150237&reg=3&lang=>
43. <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/india-beats-global-average-as-53-working-women-are-confident-in-asking-for-pay-hikes-report-12404331.html>
44. [https://www.business-standard.com/finance/personal-finance/23-of-salaried-women-in-india-see-gender-pay-gap-at-workplace-survey-124030700011\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/finance/personal-finance/23-of-salaried-women-in-india-see-gender-pay-gap-at-workplace-survey-124030700011_1.html)
45. <https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/salary-negotiations/in-salary-negotiations-women-do-ask/>