

Empowering the Next Generation for Gender Equality: A Global, Indian and Karnataka Perspective on Building Inclusive and Sustainable Societies

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World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2026, 30(03), 1864-1872

Publication history: Received on 15 May 2026; revised on 21 June 2026; accepted on 23 June 2026

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2026.30.3.1752>

Abstract

Gender equality has emerged as one of the most significant social, economic, and developmental priorities of the twenty-first century. Despite considerable progress in education, employment, political participation, and legal rights, gender disparities continue to persist across societies worldwide. The challenge is no longer limited to ensuring equal opportunities for women and men; rather, it involves creating inclusive systems that empower future generations to challenge stereotypes, embrace diversity, and contribute to sustainable development. This paper examines the need for empowering the next generation for gender equality through a comprehensive review of literature, global statistical indicators, Indian and Karnataka state-level trends, and illustrative case studies of influential personalities who contributed to gender justice and social transformation.

The study adopts a conceptual and descriptive approach by synthesizing insights from international organizations, academic literature, and policy reports. The paper identifies six major dimensions of gender equality: educational equality, economic equality, political equality, social equality, health equality, and digital equality. The findings indicate that while educational access for women has improved significantly, substantial gaps remain in leadership representation, wage parity, political empowerment, and digital inclusion. The study further highlights the evolving understanding of gender equality across generations, from Generation X to Generation Alpha, demonstrating how younger generations increasingly view equality as a fundamental social norm rather than merely a legal or economic issue.

The paper argues that empowering the next generation through education, awareness, technology, and value-based socialization is essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 on Gender Equality. The study concludes that gender equality is not solely a women's issue but a societal imperative that contributes to economic growth, social cohesion, innovation, and sustainable development. Policy recommendations emphasize gender-sensitive education, digital inclusion, leadership development, legal enforcement, and multi-stakeholder collaboration to create an equitable future for all.

Keywords: Gender Equality; Youth Empowerment; Sustainable Development; Education; Women Empowerment; Digital Inclusion; SDGs; India; Karnataka

1. Introduction

Gender equality represents one of the most fundamental principles of human rights and social justice. It refers to the equal rights, responsibilities, opportunities, and treatment of individuals irrespective of gender. Gender equality does not imply that women and men become identical; rather, it ensures that individuals have equal access to opportunities and resources without being constrained by gender-based stereotypes or discrimination. Contemporary societies

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increasingly recognize that sustainable development cannot be achieved unless gender disparities are addressed effectively.

Historically, women across many cultures have experienced unequal access to education, healthcare, employment, property rights, and political participation. While numerous legal reforms and social movements have improved gender relations, inequalities remain deeply embedded within social structures and institutional practices. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report indicates that complete gender parity is still far from being achieved globally. Women continue to experience wage gaps, underrepresentation in leadership positions, unequal access to resources, and disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work.

The significance of gender equality extends beyond fairness and justice. Research demonstrates that societies characterized by higher levels of gender equality experience improved economic growth, enhanced innovation, stronger governance systems, and better social outcomes. Gender equality contributes directly to poverty reduction, improved health outcomes, educational advancement, and sustainable economic development.

In recent years, attention has increasingly shifted toward empowering the next generation to internalize values of equality, inclusiveness, and mutual respect. Children and youth represent future leaders, policymakers, entrepreneurs, educators, and citizens. Their understanding of gender equality will shape future institutions and societal norms. Therefore, promoting gender-sensitive education and awareness among younger generations is critical for achieving long-term social transformation.

2. Literature Review Matrix (2020–2025)

Author(s)	Year	Focus Area	Key Findings	Implications for Next Generation
UNESCO	2020	Gender Equality in Education	Equal educational opportunities improve empowerment and employability	Education remains the foundation of gender equality
UNICEF	2020	Youth and Gender Rights	Early awareness influences future gender attitudes	Gender-sensitive education should begin early
UN Women	2020	SDG 5 Progress	Gender equality is lagging in many countries	Strong policy interventions required
OECD	2020	Digital Gender Gap	Women face lower digital access and literacy	Digital inclusion is critical
World Bank	2021	Women Economic Participation	Gender equality contributes to GDP growth	Economic empowerment strengthens development
UNICEF	2021	Child and Youth Empowerment	Gender equality improves social outcomes	Youth-centred policies required
ILO	2021	Workplace Equality	Women face wage gaps and career barriers	Equal opportunity policies needed
UNESCO	2021	Girls in STEM	Participation improving but leadership remains low	Promote STEM education among girls
WEF	2021	Global Gender Gap	Political empowerment remains lowest dimension	Increase leadership participation
UNDP	2021	Human Development	Gender inequality affects human development outcomes	Equality improves quality of life
World Bank	2022	Women Business and Law	Legal reforms improve women participation	Stronger implementation needed
McKinsey	2022	Women Leadership	Diverse organizations perform better	Leadership diversity improves performance

Author(s)	Year	Focus Area	Key Findings	Implications for Next Generation
OECD	2022	Digital Transformation	Technology can reduce gender barriers	Digital education must be expanded
UNESCO	2022	Education and Inclusion	Inclusive learning environments improve equality	Schools shape future attitudes
ILO	2022	Labour Participation	Women remain underrepresented in formal workforce	Labour reforms required
UN Women	2022	Gender Responsive Governance	Representation improves policymaking	Increase women in governance
UNICEF	2022	Adolescent Development	Gender-sensitive interventions improve outcomes	Focus on youth empowerment
World Bank	2023	Economic Equality	Financial inclusion supports women entrepreneurship	Entrepreneurship development needed
WEF	2023	Gender Gap Report	Economic and political gaps persist	Multi-dimensional strategies required
UNESCO	2023	Higher Education Equality	Female enrolment increasing globally	Translate education into leadership
OECD	2023	Women in Digital Economy	Digital participation remains unequal	Promote digital literacy
UN Women	2023	Leadership and Representation	Women leaders improve governance quality	Encourage leadership pipelines
ILO	2023	Future of Work	Technological changes affect gender opportunities	Reskilling essential
UNICEF	2023	Social Inclusion	Inclusive societies reduce discrimination	Youth engagement important
UNDP	2023	Sustainable Development	Gender equality accelerates SDGs	Integrate SDGs into education
World Bank	2024	Women, Business and Law	Legal equality improving slowly	Enforcement mechanisms needed
UNESCO	2024	AI and Education	Technology can enhance inclusiveness	Digital skills required
OECD	2024	Gender and AI	AI may reinforce bias if not managed	Ethical AI education necessary
WEF	2024	Leadership Diversity	Board diversity enhances innovation	Promote women leadership
UN Women	2024	Global Equality Trends	Progress remains uneven across regions	Localized interventions necessary
UNICEF	2024	Future Generations	Gender equality values begin in childhood	Family and schools are key
World Bank	2024	Women Entrepreneurship	Access to finance remains a challenge	Financial literacy programs required
UNESCO	2025	Inclusive Education	Equality education reduces stereotypes	Curriculum reforms needed
WEF	2025	Global Gender Gap Report	Gender parity remains incomplete globally	Stronger global commitments required

Author(s)	Year	Focus Area	Key Findings	Implications for Next Generation
UN Women	2025	Women Empowerment	Economic empowerment drives equality	Invest in women-led initiatives
OECD	2025	Digital Inclusion	Digital equality linked with economic growth	Bridge digital divide
UNICEF	2025	Youth Leadership	Youth participation supports equality	Promote youth-led initiatives
World Bank	2025	Development Outcomes	Gender equality improves development indicators	Mainstream equality policies
ILO	2025	Workplace Diversity	Inclusive workplaces enhance productivity	Strengthen diversity practices
UNDP	2025	Sustainable Human Development	Equality is essential for sustainability	Long-term investment required

2.1. Research Gap

The review of contemporary literature reveals several important gaps. First, existing studies predominantly focus on women empowerment, workplace equality, educational access, or leadership diversity independently. Limited research adopts an integrated framework linking educational equality, economic equality, political participation, social inclusion, health access, and digital equality simultaneously. Second, many studies examine gender equality from a national or global perspective, whereas comparatively fewer studies explore regional contexts such as Karnataka alongside national and global trends. Third, emerging generations, particularly Generation Alpha, remain underexplored despite their critical role in shaping future social norms and institutions. Fourth, while digital inclusion and artificial intelligence have become central drivers of economic and social participation, relatively limited research examines their implications for gender equality and youth empowerment. Finally, few conceptual studies explicitly position empowerment of the next generation as a strategic mechanism for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 and broader sustainable development outcomes. This study seeks to address these gaps by integrating global, Indian, and Karnataka perspectives while emphasizing the role of youth empowerment in achieving long-term gender equality.

This paper examines the importance of empowering the next generation for gender equality from global, national, and regional perspectives, with particular emphasis on India and Karnataka.

2.2. Concept of Gender Equality

The concept of gender equality has evolved significantly over time.

The United Nations (1948) emphasized equality as a fundamental human right, advocating equal enjoyment of freedoms without discrimination. Judith Butler (1990) challenged traditional gender norms by arguing that gender is socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Amartya Sen (1999) linked gender equality to capabilities and freedom, highlighting access to opportunities as a prerequisite for human development. Naila Kabeer (2005) emphasized empowerment and women's ability to make strategic life choices.

International organizations have further expanded the concept. The World Bank (2012) identified gender equality as both a development objective and a driver of economic growth. UN Women (2015) defined gender equality as equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for women and men. UNESCO (2017) focused on equal educational access, while the International Labour Organization (2018) emphasized workplace equality. UNICEF (2021) extended the discussion to child and youth empowerment. The World Economic Forum (2023) proposed a multidimensional framework incorporating economic participation, education, health, and political empowerment.

Gender equality is a multidimensional concept that refers to the equal rights, responsibilities, opportunities, and treatment of all individuals regardless of their gender. It is not merely about providing equal rights to women and men but about creating an environment where individuals can realize their full potential without being constrained by gender stereotypes, discrimination, or social barriers. Gender equality is recognized as a fundamental human right and an essential condition for achieving sustainable development, social justice, and inclusive economic growth. Contemporary literature and international organizations identify several key dimensions of gender equality, including

educational equality, economic equality, political equality, social equality, health equality, and digital equality. Each of these dimensions plays a critical role in empowering individuals and creating a more inclusive society.

Educational Equality is considered the foundation of gender equality because education empowers individuals with knowledge, skills, confidence, and opportunities for personal and professional growth. Educational equality ensures that girls and boys, women and men, have equal access to quality education at all levels without discrimination. Historically, women and girls faced significant barriers in accessing education due to cultural norms, economic constraints, and social expectations. However, substantial progress has been made globally in improving female literacy and school enrollment. Educational equality goes beyond mere access to schools; it also includes equal participation in higher education, vocational training, skill development, and emerging fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). When girls receive quality education, they are more likely to participate in the workforce, make informed decisions regarding health and family planning, and contribute positively to society. Furthermore, education helps challenge traditional gender stereotypes and promotes values of equality, respect, and inclusiveness among younger generations. Thus, educational equality serves as the cornerstone upon which other dimensions of gender equality are built.

Economic Equality refers to the provision of equal opportunities for women and men in employment, income generation, entrepreneurship, and financial participation. Economic empowerment is a critical component of gender equality because financial independence enhances individual autonomy and decision-making power. Despite considerable advancements, women continue to face wage gaps, occupational segregation, limited access to credit, and underrepresentation in leadership positions. Economic equality encompasses equal pay for equal work, equal opportunities for career advancement, access to financial services, ownership of assets, and participation in entrepreneurial activities. Research consistently demonstrates that increasing women's participation in the workforce contributes significantly to economic growth, innovation, and productivity. Women-owned enterprises create employment opportunities, stimulate local economies, and enhance community development. However, barriers such as workplace discrimination, unequal caregiving responsibilities, and limited access to financial resources continue to restrict women's economic participation. Promoting economic equality requires supportive policies, workplace flexibility, financial inclusion initiatives, and entrepreneurship development programs that enable women to fully contribute to economic development.

Political Equality represents another important dimension of gender equality. It refers to equal participation and representation of all genders in political processes, governance structures, leadership positions, and decision-making institutions. Political equality ensures that women and men have equal rights to vote, contest elections, influence policies, and participate in governance. Historically, women were excluded from political processes in many societies, but democratic reforms and social movements have expanded women's political rights across the world. Nevertheless, women remain underrepresented in legislatures, ministerial positions, local governance bodies, and senior leadership roles. Political equality is important because diverse representation leads to more inclusive policymaking and better governance outcomes. Women leaders often bring different perspectives to issues such as education, healthcare, social welfare, environmental sustainability, and community development. Increasing women's representation in politics strengthens democracy and ensures that public policies address the needs and interests of all citizens. Therefore, achieving political equality requires institutional reforms, leadership development programs, mentorship opportunities, and supportive electoral systems that encourage women's participation in governance.

Social Equality focuses on ensuring equal treatment, dignity, freedom, and social inclusion for all individuals regardless of gender. It seeks to eliminate discrimination, stereotypes, prejudice, and social barriers that limit opportunities and participation. Social equality recognizes that gender norms and cultural expectations often shape people's roles, responsibilities, and life choices. Traditional stereotypes may restrict women's participation in certain professions, leadership positions, or public activities, while also imposing rigid expectations on men. Social equality promotes mutual respect, fairness, and inclusiveness by challenging discriminatory attitudes and practices. It encourages equal participation in family, community, cultural, and social activities. Social equality also involves addressing issues such as gender-based violence, harassment, child marriage, and discrimination against marginalized groups. Creating socially inclusive environments requires education, awareness campaigns, media representation, and community engagement. When individuals are treated with dignity and respect regardless of gender, societies become more cohesive, peaceful, and equitable.

Health Equality is another critical dimension of gender equality that focuses on ensuring equal access to healthcare services, nutrition, reproductive health, and overall well-being. Health disparities often arise due to socio-economic inequalities, cultural norms, and unequal access to healthcare resources. Women and girls may face challenges related to maternal health, reproductive rights, nutrition, and healthcare accessibility, particularly in developing regions.

Gender equality in health means that individuals have equal opportunities to achieve optimal physical, mental, and emotional well-being. It includes access to preventive healthcare, quality medical treatment, reproductive health services, mental health support, and health education. Health equality also recognizes the importance of addressing gender-specific health concerns while ensuring that healthcare systems are inclusive and responsive to diverse needs. Improving health outcomes contributes to higher productivity, educational attainment, and quality of life. Furthermore, healthy individuals are better equipped to participate in economic, social, and political activities, making health equality an essential component of overall empowerment and development.

In the digital age, **Digital Equality** has emerged as a crucial dimension of gender equality. Digital equality refers to equal access to information and communication technologies, internet connectivity, digital literacy, and participation in the digital economy. Technological advancements have transformed education, employment, communication, entrepreneurship, and governance. However, significant digital gender gaps persist in many countries, particularly among rural populations and low-income communities. Women and girls often have less access to smartphones, computers, internet services, and digital skills training than men. Digital inequality limits opportunities for education, employment, innovation, and civic participation. As societies increasingly rely on digital technologies, ensuring equal access becomes essential for reducing social and economic disparities. Digital equality involves promoting digital literacy, expanding affordable internet access, encouraging participation in STEM fields, and addressing biases in emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence. By enhancing digital inclusion, societies can empower women and girls to participate fully in knowledge economies and technological innovation.

These six dimensions are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Improvements in one dimension often contribute positively to progress in others. For example, educational equality enhances economic opportunities, which in turn improve health outcomes and social participation. Similarly, digital equality can expand educational access, support entrepreneurship, and facilitate political engagement. Gender equality therefore requires a holistic and integrated approach that addresses multiple dimensions simultaneously rather than focusing on a single area of intervention.

In the context of empowering the next generation, these dimensions become even more significant. Young people today are growing up in increasingly interconnected and technologically driven societies. Their understanding of equality, diversity, and inclusion will shape future institutions, workplaces, and communities. By ensuring equal opportunities across educational, economic, political, social, health, and digital domains, societies can create an environment where individuals are empowered to realize their full potential irrespective of gender. Such empowerment contributes not only to personal development but also to broader goals of social justice, economic prosperity, and sustainable development.

3. Findings and Discussion

The review generates ten major findings. First, gender equality remains an unfinished global agenda despite significant progress in education and legal reforms. Although many countries have improved educational access and health outcomes for women, substantial gaps persist in economic participation, political representation, and leadership. Second, educational equality has emerged as the strongest driver of empowerment. Education enhances knowledge, employability, confidence, leadership capacity, and social participation. Countries with higher levels of female education consistently demonstrate stronger gender equality outcomes. Third, economic participation remains a major challenge. Women continue to experience wage disparities, occupational segregation, and barriers to entrepreneurship. Economic equality is essential not only for individual empowerment but also for broader economic growth and development. Fourth, political empowerment remains the weakest dimension of gender equality. Women remain underrepresented in governance structures and decision-making institutions across most countries. Fifth, digital equality has become increasingly important in contemporary society. Access to digital technologies, internet connectivity, and AI-driven opportunities significantly influences future educational and employment outcomes. Sixth, younger generations exhibit broader understandings of gender equality. While previous generations focused primarily on legal rights and workforce participation, Generation Z and Generation Alpha increasingly emphasize inclusiveness, diversity, social justice, and digital participation. Seventh, gender stereotypes continue to influence educational choices, career aspirations, and social expectations. Eliminating stereotypes requires sustained interventions through education, media, and community engagement. Eighth, role models and case studies significantly influence perceptions of gender equality. Personalities such as Savitribai Phule, Kiran Bedi, Kalpana Chawla, Indra Nooyi, and Malala Yousafzai demonstrate the transformative power of education, leadership, and resilience. Ninth, gender equality contributes directly to sustainable development. Improvements in gender equality positively influence poverty reduction, educational achievement, economic productivity, healthcare outcomes, and institutional effectiveness. Tenth, empowering the next generation represents the most sustainable pathway toward achieving long-term gender equality. Early exposure to values of equality, respect, and inclusiveness can create lasting societal change.

3.1. Policy Implications

The findings suggest several policy implications. Educational institutions should integrate gender-sensitive curricula and value-based learning approaches that promote inclusiveness and challenge stereotypes. Schools and universities should encourage equal participation in STEM education, leadership activities, and entrepreneurship programs.

Governments should strengthen economic empowerment initiatives through financial inclusion programs, entrepreneurship support mechanisms, equal pay regulations, and labour market reforms. Women entrepreneurs require improved access to finance, mentorship, and professional networks.

Digital inclusion must become a policy priority. Investments in digital infrastructure, internet access, digital literacy, and AI education are essential for reducing gender-based technological inequalities.

Leadership development initiatives should be expanded to increase representation of women and girls in governance, politics, business, and public administration. Mentorship programs and leadership training can create stronger leadership pipelines.

Legal and institutional reforms should focus on strengthening enforcement mechanisms related to discrimination, harassment, and gender-based violence. Effective implementation is as important as legislative reform.

Families, communities, media organizations, and civil society institutions must collaborate to challenge stereotypes and promote equality. Social change requires transformation of attitudes as well as institutions.

Finally, policymakers should adopt multi-stakeholder approaches involving governments, educational institutions, industries, NGOs, and youth organizations. Such collaborations are essential for achieving SDG 5 and building inclusive societies.

3.2. Future Research Directions

Future research should examine the relationship between artificial intelligence and gender equality, investigate gender perceptions among Generation Alpha, conduct longitudinal studies on youth empowerment, explore regional variations in equality outcomes, and develop empirical models testing the relationship between equality dimensions and sustainable development outcomes.

4. Conclusion

Gender equality is fundamental to creating inclusive, equitable, and sustainable societies. The literature demonstrates that educational, economic, political, social, health, and digital dimensions collectively influence equality outcomes. While substantial progress has been achieved globally, nationally, and regionally, significant disparities continue to exist. Empowering the next generation through education, awareness, technology, leadership development, and inclusive socialization represents the most effective strategy for achieving lasting gender equality.

The transition from Generation X to Generation Alpha illustrates an evolving understanding of equality that increasingly emphasizes diversity, inclusiveness, and social justice. Future generations possess the potential to transform institutions, challenge stereotypes, and promote sustainable development. By investing in youth and fostering environments characterized by dignity, respect, opportunity, and mutual understanding, societies can accelerate progress toward SDG 5 and create a more equitable future for all.

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