



Sustainable Development Goal-5 and Women's Empowerment in Odisha: Gendered Patterns of Parity and Participation

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Introduction

Women's empowerment has become a central concern in contemporary development policy, particularly in efforts aimed at achieving inclusive and equitable growth (UNDP, 2019; World Bank, 2020). In the Indian context, empowerment is frequently assessed through indicators such as women's participation in the workforce, access to financial institutions, improvements in health outcomes, and involvement in household decision-making (Kabeer, 1999; NITI Aayog, 2024). These indicators are widely used because they are measurable and comparable across regions. However, their ability to capture the depth and quality of empowerment remains contested, especially in contexts where participation expands without corresponding improvements in economic security, social status, or demographic outcomes (Sen, 1999; Duflo, 2012).

Over the past few decades, women's empowerment has been firmly embedded within India's development agenda, most notably through the SDG (United Nations, 2015). Policy narratives have strongly emphasised increasing female labour force participation, improving access to financial services, and enhancing gender-sensitive governance as pathways to empowerment (World Bank, 2012; Government of India, 2016). Yet emerging evidence suggests that economic inclusion does not automatically translate into social or structural empowerment (Duflo, 2012; Klasen & Pieters, 2015). Odisha illustrates this paradox clearly. Despite moderate improvements in women's work participation and expanded access to financial services, the state continues to perform poorly on key indicators of gender equality, particularly wage parity, economic autonomy, and adverse demographic outcomes such as low sex ratio at birth. According to the NITI Aayog SDG India Index 2023–24, Odisha ranks at the bottom among Indian states on SDG 5 (NITI Aayog, 2024). This contradiction, where women are increasingly visible in the economy yet remain economically undervalued and socially constrained, raises critical questions about the nature and quality of empowerment being achieved. Against this backdrop, the present article examines whether women's economic participation in Odisha has translated into genuine empowerment by analysing gendered wage disparities, labour force participation patterns, decision-making indicators, and sex ratio outcomes using evidence from the SDG India Index and the National Family Health Survey (IIPS & ICF, 2021; NITI Aayog, 2024).

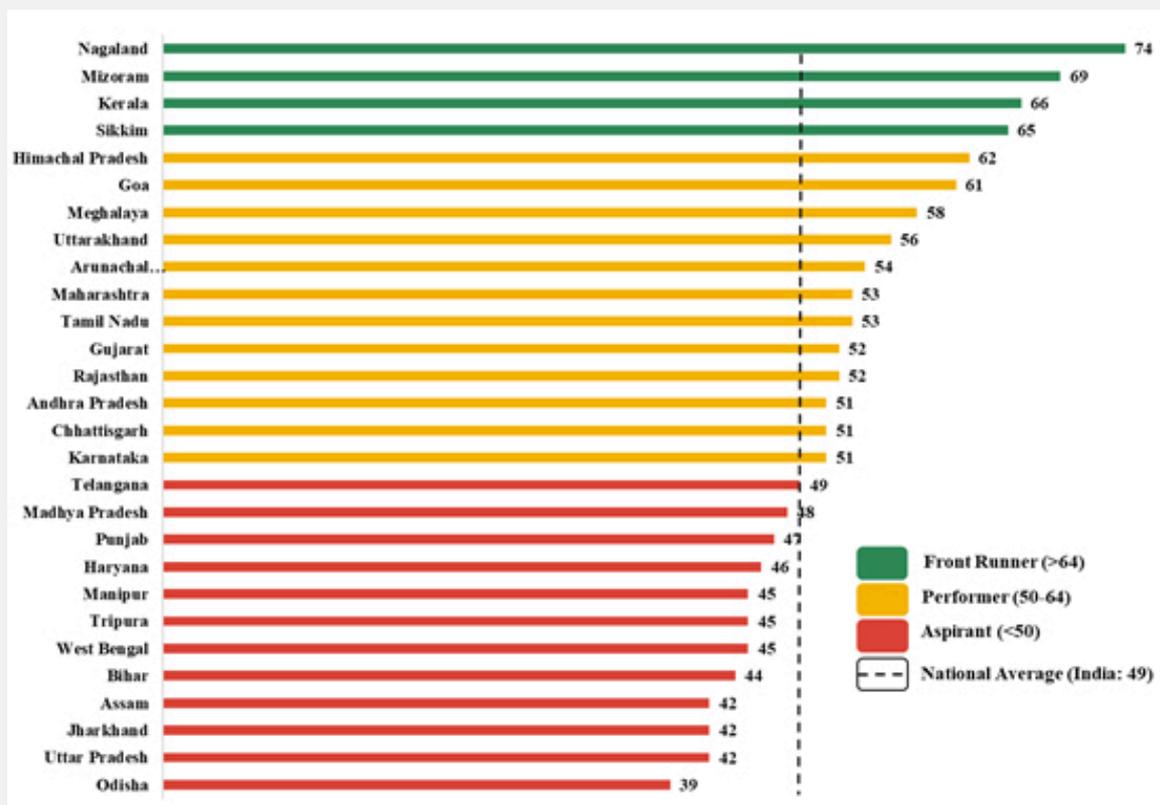
Conceptualising Empowerment: Beyond Participation

Empowerment is not merely about participation or access but about the ability to exercise control over resources, choices, and outcomes (Kabeer, 1999; Alsop et al., 2006; Patidar, 2018). While economic participation is a necessary condition for empowerment, it is insufficient if women remain concentrated in low-paid, informal, or insecure forms of work (Sen, 1999; Klasen & Pieters, 2015). Similarly, improvements in access to education, health services, or financial institutions may not result in empowerment if underlying social norms, labour market structures, and demographic preferences remain unchanged (Duflo, 2012; Jayachandran, 2015).

From a structural perspective, empowerment must be understood as an outcome of transformations in power relations rather than numerical inclusion alone (Kabeer, 2005; Cornwall & Edwards, 2010). When women enter the

labour market under conditions of low remuneration and limited mobility, their participation may reflect economic compulsion rather than enhanced autonomy (Sen, 1999; Klasen & Pieters, 2015). Likewise, when improvements in health and education coexist with skewed sex ratios and persistent son preference, it indicates that deeper patriarchal norms continue to shape demographic behaviour (Jayachandran, 2015; Patidar & Mishra, 2024). Odisha provides an important empirical context to interrogate these limits, as its performance on SDG-5 reflects a combination of economic inclusion and persistent social disadvantage (NITI Aayog, 2024).

Figure 1: SDG-5 (Gender Equality) Index Score by States of India, 2023-24



Source: Prepared by authors from SDG India Index 2023-24

Gendered Wage Gaps: The Persistence of Economic Inequality

Among all Indian states, Odisha records the lowest female-to-male wage ratio. As per the SDG India Index 2023–24, women in Odisha earn only 59 percent of male earnings, substantially below the national average of 0.76. This persistent wage gap indicates that women’s participation in the workforce has not translated into equitable economic returns. Wage inequality thus emerges as a central constraint on empowerment, limiting women’s ability to achieve financial independence and long-term security. Table 1 presents selected SDG-5 indicators comparing Odisha with the national average. The table clearly shows that while some dimensions of participation and access have improved, wage parity remains severely compromised. The problem extends beyond labour market entry to the structure of employment itself. Women in Odisha are disproportionately concentrated in low-paying sectors, informal employment, and casual work, with limited access to stable salaried positions. The stagnation of wage parity across successive SDG Index assessments suggests that these disparities are rooted in structural features of the labour market rather than short-term economic fluctuations.

Table 1: Performance of SDG-5 Indicators at India and Odisha, 2023-24

Indicators	India	Odisha
Sex ratio at birth	929	894

Ratio of female to male average wage/salary earnings received among regular wage/ salaried employees	0.76	0.59
Percentage of ever married women aged 18-49 years who have ever experienced spousal violence (physical/ sexual)	29.2	30.3
Ratio of female to male Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) (15-59 years)	0.48	0.58
Proportion of women in managerial positions including women in board of directors, in listed companies (per 1,000 persons)	210.24	216.45
Percentage of currently married women aged 15-49 years who have their demand for family planning satisfied by any modern method	74.1	60.0
Percentage of female operated operational land holdings	13.96	4.06
Percentage of women (aged 15-49 years) who own a mobile phone that they themselves use	53.9	50.1
Percentage of currently married women (aged 15- 49 years) who usually participate in three household decisions	88.7	90.2
SDG 5 Index Score	49	39

Source: Prepared by authors from SDG India Index 2023-24

Labour Force Participation: Quantity without Quality

Odisha presents a relatively favourable picture in terms of women's labour force participation, compared to national average. The female-to-male labour force participation ratio for the 15–59 years age group stood at 0.58 in 2023–24, higher than the all-India ratio of 0.48. At an aggregate level, this suggests progress toward greater inclusion of women in economic activity. This pattern is also reflected in the proportion of women in managerial positions, including women serving on boards of directors in listed companies, which stands at 216.45 per 1,000 persons in Odisha, marginally higher than the national average of 210.24. While this relative advantage indicates some improvement in women's representation in leadership roles, the absolute level remains modest and does not significantly alter the broader structure of gendered employment. However, higher participation and limited gains in managerial representation coexist with poor wage outcomes and restricted occupational mobility, indicating that women's labour continues to be undervalued. Much of women's work remains concentrated in household enterprises, agriculture, and informal services, where remuneration is low and employment conditions are insecure. The persistence of vertical occupational segregation suggests that women are still largely confined to subordinate and low-paying positions within the labour market hierarchy, with restricted access to positions of authority, strategic decision-making, and control over productive resources. As a result, participation has increased in quantitative terms without corresponding gains in economic security, bargaining power, or upward mobility. This disconnect reinforces the need to assess empowerment through the quality of employment and leadership representation rather than participation alone.

Decision-Making within Households: Symbolic or Substantive?

Indicators of household decision-making are often used to assess women's agency. NFHS-5 data suggest that a high proportion of currently married women in Odisha (90.2%) report participation in key household decisions. While this may indicate an expanded role within domestic spaces, it contrasts sharply with women's limited control over economic resources and persistent wage disadvantages. This divergence raises questions about the substantive meaning of decision-making participation. In contexts where women's labour is economically necessary but poorly rewarded, decision-making may remain embedded within negotiated and unequal power relations rather than

reflecting genuine autonomy. Without control over income, assets, or employment choices, participation in household decisions may have limited capacity to alter women's economic position or long-term life chances.

Sex Ratio at Birth and the Demographic Dimension of Disempowerment

One of the most revealing indicators of gender inequality is the sex ratio at birth, which reflects societal preferences and the relative value placed on female children. Odisha continues to record an unfavourable sex ratio at birth, indicating the persistence of son preference despite improvements in women's education, health, and economic participation. Figure 1, which presents the SDG-5 index across Indian states, includes sex ratio at birth as a core component of gender equality. Odisha's poor performance on this indicator suggests that deep-rooted cultural norms continue to shape reproductive behaviour and demographic outcomes. The coexistence of higher female labour participation and adverse sex ratio trends reveals a critical contradiction. While women may be increasingly contributing to household economies, their social valuation remains limited, even at the level of survival and birth. The persistence of skewed sex ratios implies that empowerment cannot be reduced to economic indicators alone. Demographic outcomes capture a deeper layer of social inequality, where women's status is shaped by intergenerational preferences, inheritance systems, and patriarchal family structures. In this sense, sex ratio at birth functions as a demographic mirror of structural disempowerment.

Financial Inclusion and Digital Access: Access without Control

Financial inclusion indicators further highlight the gap between access and empowerment. A large proportion of women in Odisha now report having their own bank accounts, reflecting the reach of inclusion-oriented policy initiatives. However, access to financial institutions does not necessarily translate into financial autonomy. Limited access to digital tools such as mobile phones constrains women's ability to independently use financial services, access labour markets, or engage with information networks. This gap between formal inclusion and functional control underscores the limitations of approaches that focus on account ownership without addressing digital access, literacy, and gendered norms surrounding technology use. Without these complementary dimensions, financial inclusion risks remaining procedural rather than transformative.

Discussion: The Illusion of Empowerment

The combined evidence from wage indicators, labour force participation, household decision-making, financial inclusion, and sex ratio outcomes points to a broader pattern of partial empowerment. Women in Odisha are increasingly participating in economic activities, accessing institutions, and contributing to household survival, yet they continue to earn less, occupy insecure forms of employment, face demographic disadvantage, and exercise limited control over productive resources.

This pattern reflects what may be described as an illusion of empowerment, where inclusion into economic and social systems occurs without a redistribution of power. Improvements in participation coexist with persistent inequalities because the structural foundations of gender hierarchy remain largely intact. Without transforming labour markets, social norms, and demographic preferences, empowerment remains symbolic rather than substantive.

Policy Implications

The findings underscore the need to reorient gender-focused policies from access-based metrics toward outcome-based measures of empowerment. This requires greater emphasis on wage equality, enforcement of labour protections, expansion of secure and skilled employment opportunities for women, and stronger links between financial inclusion and economic autonomy. Equally important is the need to address social and demographic dimensions, particularly through interventions aimed at reducing son preference, strengthening reproductive rights,

and promoting gender-equitable norms. Empowerment policies must therefore integrate economic, social, and demographic strategies rather than treating them as separate domains.

Conclusion

Odisha's experience demonstrates that women's empowerment cannot be adequately measured through participation or access alone. The coexistence of relatively high labour force participation, expanding financial inclusion, persistent wage inequality, and adverse sex ratio at birth highlights the limits of prevailing empowerment frameworks. Genuine empowerment requires not only that women work and participate, but that their work is fairly valued, their reproductive lives are free from discrimination, and their decisions are supported by economic and social power. Recognising and addressing this gap is essential for advancing meaningful gender equality and achieving the objectives of SDG 5.

Declaration

We hereby declare that this article is an original work and has not been published previously in any journal, edited volume, or online platform. The article is submitted exclusively to IndiaStat for consideration under the Socio-Economic Voices section.

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