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A STUDY ON WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS **JURISPRUDENCE**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION
1.1	Background of the study
1.2	Significance of the study
1.3	Review of literature
1.4	Research Gap
1.5	Research objectives
1.6	Research questions
1.7	Research methodology
1.7.1	- Primary sources
1.7.2	- Secondary sources
1.8	Limitations of the study
1.9	Scheme of the study
2	CHAPTER 2 – CONCEPT AND DEVELOPMENT OF WOMENS HUMAN RIGHT
2.1	Meaning and nature of womens human right
2.2	Historical evolution of womens humna right
2.3	Equality and non discrimination
2.4	Reproductive rights and bodily automomy
2.5	Rights against violence and explotitation
2.6	Economic, social and cultural rights of women
3	CHAPTER 3 – LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND JUDICAL APPROACH
3.1	Constirtutional protection of women rights
3.2	Fundamental rigfhfts and directive principles

3.3	Sexual harassment of women at workplace Act ,2013
3.4	Relevant Provision of BNS,2023
3.5	International human rights instrument
3.6	Judicial Approach toward gender equality and women rights
4	CHAPTER 4 – CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES
4.1	Women right and Article 14
4.2	Women rights and Article 15
4.3	Women rights and Article 21
4.4	Right to privacy, dignity and bodily autonomy
4.5	Gender discrimination and social equality
4.6	Violence against women
5	CHAPTER 5 – CRITICAL ANALYSIS, FINDING AND SUGGESTION
5.1	Effectiveness of the existing legal framework
5.2	Gaps in the protection of women's human rights
5.3	Major findings
5.4	Suggestions and Recommendations
6	CHAPTER 6 - CONCLUSION

TABLE OF CASES

1	Vishaka v. State of rajasthan	1997
2	Githa Hariharan v. reserve bank of india	1999
3	Anuj garg v. Hotel association of india	2008
4	Suchita srivastava v. chandigarh administration	2009
5	Hiral p. harsora v. Kusum narottamdas harsora	2016
6	Shayara bano v. union of india	2017
7	K.S Puttaswamy v. union of india	2017
8	Joseph shine v. union of india	2018

CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Human rights are based on the recognition that all individuals possess inherent worth and are entitled to live with dignity, equality, freedom and security. These rights enable individuals to participate meaningfully in social, economic, political and cultural affairs. The human rights of women constitute an integral component of this broader framework. Nevertheless, women have historically faced various forms of discrimination arising from legal rules, social practices and institutional structures. Such inequalities have affected their ability to exercise rights relating to education, property, employment, political participation, personal liberty, bodily integrity and equal protection under law. The Constitution of India establishes equality and human dignity as fundamental components of the legal system. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on specified grounds, including sex, while also permitting the State to adopt special measures for the advancement and protection of women and children. Article 16 establishes equality of opportunity in matters relating to public employment. Article 21, through the interpretation developed by the Supreme Court of India, has acquired a wider meaning and encompasses several dimensions of a dignified life, including personal autonomy, privacy and decisional freedom. The constitutional framework is further supported by the Directive Principles of State Policy and Fundamental Duties, which contribute to the promotion of social justice and respect for human dignity. The development of women's rights in India has taken place not only through legislation but also through constitutional adjudication. Indian courts have significantly contributed to the interpretation of constitutional guarantees in response to changing social realities. A significant example is *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan*, in which the Supreme Court considered sexual harassment at the workplace as a violation of fundamental rights and relied upon Articles 14, 19 and 21 while formulating guidelines for protection against such conduct. The judgment demonstrates the role that constitutional interpretation, international human-rights principles and judicial remedies can play when addressing areas where legislative protection is inadequate. The Supreme Court has subsequently dealt with several other dimensions of women's equality and autonomy. In *Suchita Srivastava v. Chandigarh Administration*, the Court recognized reproductive choice as an aspect of personal liberty. In *Shayara Bano v. Union of India*, questions concerning gender equality were examined in the context of personal law. In *Joseph Shine v. Union of India*, the constitutional validity of the law relating to adultery was considered in relation to individual autonomy,

dignity and gender-based assumptions. Similarly, the decisions in Babita Puniya and Lt. Col. Nitisha examined the impact of gender stereotypes and structural barriers upon women's opportunities and participation in the armed forces.¹ Legislative measures have also contributed substantially to the protection of women. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 provides a range of remedies for women subjected to domestic violence, including protection orders, residence-related relief, monetary assistance and compensation. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 establishes a statutory framework for preventing and addressing sexual harassment in the workplace and provides institutional mechanisms for receiving and resolving complaints. In addition, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, which came into force on 1 July 2024, contains provisions dealing specifically with offences against women and children. The protection of women's rights must also be understood within the framework of international human-rights law. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) constitutes one of the principal international instruments dealing specifically with discrimination against women. India signed the Convention in 1980 and ratified it in 1993, subject to declarations and reservations. International human-rights standards have contributed to the development of Indian legal reasoning, particularly in circumstances where constitutional provisions and domestic legislation are interpreted consistently with India's international commitments. In this context, the present study examines the development of women's human-rights jurisprudence in India by considering constitutional provisions, legislation, judicial decisions and selected international standards. Particular attention is given to the distinction between formal recognition of equality and the achievement of substantive equality. The study also considers the practical and institutional difficulties that may prevent women from fully benefiting from rights that are formally guaranteed by law.

1.2 Significance of the Study

The study of women's human-rights jurisprudence is important because the existence of legal equality does not, by itself, eliminate discrimination or social disadvantage. Women may continue to encounter obstacles within families, workplaces, educational institutions, government bodies and justice-delivery mechanisms. Issues involving bodily autonomy, reproductive decision-making, violence, sexual harassment, property, employment and

¹ 1. Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, arts 1–2; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women 1979, arts 1–3.
2. Constitution of India 1950, arts 14–16.

political participation therefore require an examination that goes beyond the formal declaration of equality. The subject is particularly relevant from the perspective of constitutional law. Through judicial interpretation, Articles 14, 15 and 21 have developed into significant constitutional safeguards against discriminatory treatment and gender-based stereotypes. Studying these judicial developments makes it possible to understand how broad constitutional principles are applied to particular social and legal disputes. It also illustrates the gradual movement in constitutional jurisprudence from an emphasis on formal equality towards substantive equality, dignity and individual autonomy. The study has practical significance as well. Legislative measures such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013 establish specific rights and institutional remedies. However, the effectiveness of these legal mechanisms depends upon factors such as public awareness, proper institutional implementation, accessibility of remedies, administrative responsiveness and timely judicial proceedings. Examination of the relevant jurisprudence can therefore help identify the difference that may exist between rights recognized in law and their actual realization.²

1.3 Review of Literature

The existing literature on women's rights provides important theoretical, constitutional and socio-legal perspectives for the present research.

1. Flavia Agnes, in *Law and Gender Inequality: The Politics of Women's Rights in India*, examines the relationship between legal institutions, gender relations and social structures. Her work provides a critical perspective on the manner in which law can both respond to and reproduce existing inequalities.
2. Ratna Kapur, through *Gender, Alterity and Human Rights: Freedom in a Fishbowl*, critically examines conventional human-rights approaches to gender and considers the relationship between women's freedom, identity and rights-based frameworks.
3. Catharine A. MacKinnon, in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, offers an influential feminist legal analysis of structural gender inequality and explores the role of legal institutions in maintaining or challenging gender hierarchies.
4. The writings of Indira Jaising on women's rights, constitutionalism and legal reform contribute to the understanding of legal strategies relating to gender equality, violence

² 1. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women 1979, arts 1–3. 2 .MP Jain, *Indian Constitutional Law* (9th edn, LexisNexis 2024).

against women and institutional accountability in India.

5. CEDAW and other United Nations human-rights instruments provide international standards relating to equality, non-discrimination, participation and protection from violence. These instruments are useful for understanding the broader international framework within which women's human rights have developed.
6. Indian constitutional jurisprudence, including decisions such as Vishaka, Suchita Srivastava, Shayara Bano, Joseph Shine, Babita Puniya, Vineeta Sharma and Lt. Col. Nitisha, provides substantial judicial material for examining the changing understanding of women's equality, autonomy, dignity and legal protection. The existing literature therefore provides a strong foundation for analysing women's rights from constitutional, feminist, statutory and international perspectives. The present research builds upon these sources while attempting to examine the relationship between different areas of women's rights within a broader human-rights framework.³

1.4 Research Gap

A substantial body of scholarship has examined individual aspects of women's rights, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, reproductive autonomy, personal law, property rights and equality in employment. While these studies provide valuable insights into particular legal issues, there remains scope for examining these different areas collectively as interconnected dimensions of women's human rights. Another important area requiring examination is the relationship between judicial recognition of rights and the implementation of statutory protections. Courts may establish principles based on equality, dignity and personal autonomy, yet the practical enjoyment of these rights can remain affected by social attitudes, economic dependence, institutional weaknesses and difficulties in accessing legal remedies. The present study therefore seeks to examine both the development of legal principles and the practical challenges associated with their implementation. The study also considers the relationship between Indian constitutional jurisprudence and selected international human-rights standards, particularly CEDAW. International principles are not assumed to be directly applicable to every Indian legal situation. Instead, they are examined as interpretive and comparative sources that can assist in understanding the evolution of domestic standards concerning equality and women's human rights.

³ 1. Flavia Agnes, *Law and Gender Inequality: The Politics of Women's Rights in India* (Oxford University Press 1999)
2. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women 1979, arts 1–16.

1.5 Research Objectives

The present study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To examine the meaning, scope and historical development of women's human rights.
- To analyse the constitutional and statutory provisions relating to the protection of women's human rights in India.
- To study significant judicial decisions that have influenced the development of women's rights jurisprudence.
- To examine the interrelationship between equality, dignity, privacy, personal autonomy and substantive gender justice.
- To identify significant legal, social and institutional challenges affecting the realization of women's human rights.
- To propose appropriate legal and institutional measures for improving the protection of women's rights and access to justice.

1.6 Research Questions

The study seeks to address the following research questions:

- What is the nature and scope of women's human rights under Indian constitutional and statutory law?
- What role has the Indian judiciary played in shaping and expanding women's human-rights jurisprudence?
- In what manner do Articles 14, 15 and 21 protect women from discrimination and violations of dignity and personal autonomy?
- How effectively do existing statutory mechanisms address domestic violence and sexual harassment at the workplace?
- What are the principal legal and institutional difficulties affecting the realization of women's human rights?
- What measures may strengthen constitutional, legislative and institutional mechanisms for protecting women's rights?

1.7 Research Methodology

The present research follows a doctrinal and analytical methodology. The study relies primarily upon legal and documentary sources rather than empirical field investigation. Constitutional provisions, legislation, judicial decisions, international instruments, academic books, research

articles, institutional reports and reliable legal materials are examined and analysed. No questionnaire, field survey or personal interview has been conducted as part of this research. The collected materials are examined thematically to identify the development of legal principles concerning equality, non-discrimination, dignity, personal autonomy, protection from violence and women's participation in social, economic and public life.

1.7.1 Primary Sources

The principal primary sources include:

The Constitution of India, 1950, The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013. The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023., Relevant judgments of the Supreme Court of India and High Courts., The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Other relevant international human-rights instruments.

1.7.2 Secondary Sources

The secondary materials consulted for the study include:

Books dealing with constitutional law, feminist legal theory and women's rights. Scholarly articles and publications appearing in law journals. Reports issued by national and international institutions. Legal commentaries and academic writings. Reliable legal databases and official government websites. The materials are analysed with particular emphasis on the development of legal principles concerning equality, dignity, autonomy, non-discrimination, freedom from violence and participation. International standards are used selectively to provide comparative and interpretive perspectives on Indian law.⁴

1.8 Limitations of the Study

The study is subject to the following limitations:

The research is primarily doctrinal and does not involve empirical fieldwork. The principal focus is on the constitutional and legal framework applicable in India. International instruments are considered selectively and primarily for comparative and interpretive purposes. It is not possible to examine every aspect of women's human rights or every judicial decision within the scope of a single study. Differences in implementation between States, institutions and local contexts are not independently measured through field research. The legal framework may continue to develop after the completion of the research, requiring subsequent examination of

⁴ 1. Shipra Agarwal, Legal Research Methodology (Allahabad Law Agency 2016).

2. Mahalakshmi and P Balamurugan, Legal Research Methodology (Eastern Book Company 2026).

new legislation and judicial decisions.

1.9 Scheme of the Study

The research is organized into five chapters.

Chapter I – Introduction introduces the subject of the research and discusses its background, significance, existing literature, research gap, objectives, research questions, methodology and limitations.

Chapter II – Concept and Development of Women's Human Rights examines the meaning and evolution of women's human rights. It discusses concepts such as equality, non-discrimination, dignity, bodily autonomy, freedom from violence and economic, social and cultural rights.

Chapter III – Constitutional, Statutory and Judicial Framework analyses the constitutional and legislative mechanisms relating to women's human rights and examines significant judicial decisions. It also considers selected international human-rights standards relevant to the subject.

Chapter IV – Constitutional Rights and Contemporary Challenges examines the practical and legal challenges affecting women's human rights, including gender discrimination, violence against women, workplace sexual harassment and barriers to access to justice.

Chapter V – Findings, Suggestions and Conclusion provides a critical assessment of the legal framework, presents the principal findings of the research and proposes legal and institutional measures for strengthening the effective protection and realization of women's human rights.⁵

CHAPTER II --CONCEPT AND DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS

Women's human rights form an integral part of the broader framework of universal human rights. They are based on the understanding that women, like all other human beings, are entitled to equality, dignity, liberty, security and meaningful participation in society. The need for a specific focus on women's rights has emerged from the historical reality that women have often experienced discrimination and unequal treatment because of their gender. Consequently, the development of women's human rights cannot be understood merely by examining formal declarations of equality; it also requires consideration of the social, economic, cultural and

⁵ Mark VanHoecke (ed), Methodologies of Legal Research: Which Kind of Method for What Kind of Discipline? (Hart Publishing 2011).

Government of India, India Code, 'The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005' <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/> accessed 29 September 2026.

institutional conditions that influence the actual enjoyment of those rights.

2.1 Meaning and Nature of Women's Human Rights

Women's human rights may broadly be described as the rights and freedoms to which women are entitled on an equal basis with men, together with legal safeguards designed to address forms of discrimination, violence and disadvantage that particularly affect women. These rights extend across several areas of life. They include civil and political freedoms, economic and social rights, cultural participation, access to education and healthcare, property and employment rights, reproductive autonomy, freedom from violence and the ability to obtain effective legal remedies. The concept has both a universal dimension and a gender-specific dimension. Women are entitled to the same fundamental human rights enjoyed by all individuals. At the same time, certain forms of discrimination and violence may require specific legal measures because of women's historical and continuing disadvantage. The Indian Constitution recognizes this distinction through Article 15(3), which enables the State to make special provisions for women and children. An important aspect of women's human rights is the idea of substantive equality. Equality cannot always be achieved simply by treating every individual in exactly the same manner. Where individuals begin from unequal social or economic positions, identical treatment may sometimes preserve existing disadvantage. Substantive equality therefore requires attention to the actual consequences of laws and policies and considers whether additional measures are necessary to enable women to participate in society on an equal footing.⁶

2.2 Historical Evolution of Women's Human Rights

The development of women's rights has been a gradual process shaped by social movements, legislative reforms, constitutional developments and judicial decisions. Earlier legal systems in many societies provided women with limited independence in areas such as education, property, marriage, employment and political participation. Over time, demands for equality challenged these restrictions and contributed to the recognition of women as independent rights-bearing individuals. At the international level, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 established human dignity and equality as fundamental principles applicable to all persons. Subsequent international instruments developed these principles further. The

⁶ 1. Flavia Agnes, *Law and Gender Inequality: The Politics of Women's Rights in India* (Oxford University Press 1999).
2. Ratna Kapur, *Gender, Alterity and Human Rights: Freedom in a Fishbowl* (Edward Elgar Publishing 2018).

adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) represented a significant development because it specifically addressed discrimination against women and placed obligations upon States to take measures towards achieving equality. In India, the adoption of the Constitution in 1950 provided a strong legal foundation for gender equality. Constitutional guarantees were subsequently supported by legislation addressing specific forms of discrimination and violence, including dowry-related practices, domestic violence, sexual harassment, trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Judicial interpretation has also played an important role in expanding the understanding of equality, liberty and dignity. The development of women's rights has not been completely uniform. Indian courts and legislatures have frequently had to consider situations in which customary practices, personal laws, institutional rules or established social practices came into conflict with constitutional principles. Contemporary jurisprudence increasingly examines whether legal rules or institutional practices reinforce gender stereotypes or restrict women's ability to exercise equal citizenship and personal autonomy.

2.3 Equality and Non-Discrimination

Equality is one of the fundamental principles underlying women's human rights. Article 14 of the Constitution guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws. Article 15(1) prohibits the State from discriminating against individuals on specified grounds, including sex, while Article 15(3) permits special provisions for women and children. Article 16 further guarantees equality of opportunity in matters relating to public employment. The constitutional understanding of equality has developed considerably through judicial interpretation. Equality is no longer viewed only as a requirement that similarly situated individuals should receive identical treatment. Courts have also considered whether legal classifications are reasonable and whether apparently neutral rules or institutional practices reinforce gender-based assumptions.

The decision in *Anuj Garg v Hotel Association of India* is significant in this regard. The Supreme Court examined restrictions placed upon women's employment and questioned the use of protective measures as a basis for limiting women's opportunities. The judgment emphasized the need to scrutinize laws that are based upon stereotypical assumptions about women's capabilities or their place in society. Consequently, achieving gender equality requires more than removing openly discriminatory rules. It also involves identifying and addressing institutional practices and social conditions that prevent women from participating on equal terms. This approach has influenced judicial developments relating to employment,

military service, property, marriage, family relationships and participation in public life.⁷

2.4 Reproductive Rights and Bodily Autonomy

Reproductive rights relate to an individual's ability to make informed decisions concerning reproduction and reproductive health within the framework established by law. These decisions may involve matters such as pregnancy, contraception, medical treatment and reproductive healthcare. The Supreme Court's decision in *Suchita Srivastava v Chandigarh Administration* is particularly important in this area. The Court recognized reproductive choice as an aspect of personal liberty under Article 21. The decision contributed to the understanding that reproductive decisions involve individual autonomy and cannot be viewed solely from the perspective of family or social interests. The principle of bodily autonomy emphasizes that women should have control over decisions affecting their own bodies. Neither family members nor social institutions should automatically be regarded as having authority over such personal decisions. At the same time, reproductive rights operate within the constitutional and statutory framework applicable to particular circumstances. Some reproductive-rights questions may involve competing legal interests and therefore require careful judicial consideration. In addressing such issues, constitutional values such as dignity, privacy, autonomy and equality provide important principles for determining the scope of individual rights.

2.5 Rights Against Violence and Exploitation

Protection from violence is an essential element of women's human rights. Violence against women can occur in different environments, including the home, workplace, educational institutions and public spaces. Women may also face trafficking, sexual exploitation and other forms of coercion. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 represents an important legislative response to violence within domestic relationships. The Act recognizes different forms of domestic violence, including physical, sexual, verbal, emotional and economic abuse. It provides several forms of relief intended to protect women and address the consequences of domestic violence. The legal framework includes remedies such as protection orders, residence orders, monetary relief, custody-related orders and compensation. This demonstrates that protection from domestic violence cannot depend solely upon criminal prosecution. In appropriate circumstances, immediate civil and protective remedies may also

⁷ *Constitution of India 1950, arts 14, 15, 16 and 21.

*Anuj Garg v Hotel Association of India, (2008) 3 SCC 1.

*Joseph Shine v Union of India, (2019) 3 SCC 39.

be necessary to safeguard the victim. The legislation also assigns responsibilities to various authorities and institutions, including Protection Officers, service providers, medical facilities and police authorities. Effective implementation therefore requires coordination between legal institutions and other agencies involved in assisting women experiencing domestic violence. Workplace sexual harassment represents another significant form of gender-based harm. A safe working environment is closely connected with equality, dignity and women's ability to participate in employment. Following the principles established in *Vishaka v State of Rajasthan*, the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 established a statutory mechanism for preventing and addressing sexual harassment. The legislation provides for complaint and inquiry mechanisms through Internal Committees and Local Committees.⁸

2.6 Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of Women

Women's human rights extend beyond civil and political freedoms. They also include the ability to obtain education, employment, healthcare, property, social security and meaningful participation in economic and social life. These rights are interconnected. For example, economic independence can influence a woman's ability to leave an abusive relationship, obtain legal assistance or make independent decisions concerning her life. Women's property rights provide an important example of the relationship between legal equality and economic empowerment. In *Vineeta Sharma v Rakesh Sharma*, the Supreme Court examined the rights of daughters as coparceners under the amended Hindu Succession Act. The Court affirmed that daughters have equal coparcenary rights, thereby strengthening the principle of gender equality in relation to ancestral property. The realization of economic, social and cultural rights can nevertheless be affected by factors beyond the formal legal framework. Social expectations, unequal access to education, economic dependence, discriminatory employment practices and institutional barriers may limit women's opportunities even where the law formally guarantees equality. For this reason, a comprehensive understanding of women's human rights must consider both legal recognition and actual access to opportunities. Ensuring equality requires not only the removal of discriminatory laws but also measures that enable women to participate effectively in education, employment, economic activity, healthcare, public institutions and other areas of social life.

⁸ Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013.

**Vineeta Sharma v Rakesh Sharma*, (2020) 9 SCC 1.

CHAPTER III – LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND JUDICIAL APPROACH

The protection of women's human rights in India is based on a combination of constitutional principles, legislation, judicial decisions and international human-rights commitments. The Constitution provides the basic foundation of equality, liberty and dignity, while legislation addresses particular forms of violence, discrimination and exploitation faced by women. The judiciary plays an important role in interpreting these provisions and adapting constitutional principles to changing social realities. Together, these sources demonstrate that women's human rights are not confined to formal legal equality but also involve dignity, autonomy, security and meaningful participation in social life.

3.1 Constitutional Protection of Women's Rights

The Constitution of India provides the principal legal foundation for the protection of women's rights. Articles 14, 15 and 16 are particularly important in establishing the constitutional commitment to equality. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on specified grounds, including sex, while Article 15(3) permits the State to adopt special measures for women and children. Article 16 guarantees equality of opportunity in matters relating to public employment. Article 21 has acquired a broader significance through judicial interpretation. Although the provision expressly protects life and personal liberty, the Supreme Court has interpreted it to include aspects of human dignity, privacy, personal autonomy and the right to live a meaningful life. These principles are especially relevant to women because violations of bodily integrity, personal choice and dignity often occur within family, workplace and social relationships. Other constitutional provisions also contribute to the protection of women. Article 19 protects important freedoms such as speech, expression and movement, while Article 23 prohibits trafficking and forced labour. The Directive Principles of State Policy further reflect the Constitution's commitment to social and economic justice. Articles 39(a), 39(d) and 42, for example, address livelihood, equal pay and humane working conditions, including maternity-related protection. The constitutional scheme therefore goes beyond a simple prohibition of discrimination. It combines enforceable rights with broader responsibilities placed upon the State to create conditions in which women can participate in society on an equal basis. The constitutional framework consequently provides a basis for examining both individual instances of discrimination and the wider social structures that may restrict women's equality.⁹

⁹ MP Jain, Indian Constitutional Law (9th edn, LexisNexis 2025)

3.2 Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles

Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy perform different constitutional functions, but they operate together in the pursuit of social justice. Fundamental Rights provide enforceable guarantees to individuals, while the Directive Principles guide the State in developing policies and laws aimed at improving social and economic conditions. Article 15(3) is particularly significant in the context of women's rights. It permits the State to introduce special provisions for women without treating such measures as inconsistent with the constitutional principle of equality. This reflects the understanding that treating everyone identically does not always produce genuine equality. Where historical disadvantage or social conditions place women in an unequal position, appropriate protective or supportive measures may be necessary to achieve substantive equality. Indian constitutional jurisprudence has increasingly recognised the relationship between Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles. Courts have relied upon constitutional values relating to social justice, dignity and equality while interpreting enforceable rights. As a result, gender justice is increasingly understood in terms of women's actual experiences and opportunities rather than merely the absence of explicit discriminatory classifications.

3.3 Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 provides a statutory framework for preventing and addressing sexual harassment in the workplace. The legislation establishes procedures through which complaints can be made and investigated and provides institutional mechanisms for redressal. The Act provides for Internal Committees within workplaces and Local Committees for situations falling within their statutory jurisdiction. It also contains provisions concerning complaints, inquiry procedures, interim measures, confidentiality and appeals. These mechanisms are intended to create an environment in which women can report workplace harassment without being deprived of their dignity or employment opportunities. The statutory framework developed from the constitutional principles established in *Vishaka v State of Rajasthan*. In that case, the Supreme Court recognised that sexual harassment at the workplace could violate constitutional guarantees of equality, freedom and personal liberty. In the absence of specific legislation at that time, the Court formulated guidelines for preventing and addressing workplace sexual harassment. The enactment of the 2013 legislation transformed these judicial guidelines into a

Flavia Agnes, *Law and Gender Inequality: The Politics of Women's Rights in India* (Oxford University Press 2001).

statutory framework. However, the existence of a legal mechanism does not automatically ensure effective protection. Institutions must ensure that complaint committees function properly, complaints are dealt with fairly and confidentially, and women are protected from retaliation. Consequently, implementation is as important as the formal existence of the law.¹⁰

3.4 Relevant Provisions of Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 replaced the Indian Penal Code as India's principal general criminal law and came into force on 1 July 2024. It contains provisions dealing specifically with offences against women and children, including offences relating to sexual violence, sexual harassment, voyeurism, stalking and other forms of conduct affecting women. The BNS operates alongside several special laws dealing with particular forms of harm against women. Depending upon the circumstances, an incident may involve provisions of the BNS as well as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, the workplace sexual-harassment legislation or other relevant statutes. The existence of several legal frameworks makes proper identification of applicable provisions and access to appropriate legal remedies particularly important. Criminal law serves important functions of punishment and deterrence, but the protection of women's human rights cannot depend solely on criminal sanctions. Prevention, civil remedies, institutional accountability, support services and effective access to justice are equally important. A meaningful assessment of women's legal protection must therefore consider the broader system of remedies rather than focusing exclusively on punishment.

3.5 International Human Rights Instruments

International human-rights law has contributed significantly to the development of contemporary standards relating to women's equality and dignity. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is particularly important because it addresses discrimination against women across political, economic, social, cultural and civil spheres. India signed CEDAW on 30 July 1980 and ratified it on 9 July 1993, subject to certain declarations and reservations. The Convention provides an international framework for examining discrimination and encouraging States to adopt appropriate legal and institutional measures to promote women's equality. Other international instruments are also relevant to women's human rights. These include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,

¹⁰ India Code – Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005
Ratna Kapur, Gender, Alterity and Human Rights: Freedom in a Fishbowl (Edward Elgar Publishing 2018).

the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Collectively, these instruments address issues such as equality, freedom, participation, protection from violence and access to economic and social rights. Indian courts have, in appropriate circumstances, referred to international conventions while interpreting constitutional rights. Such reliance has been particularly significant where domestic legislation was absent or incomplete and the relevant international principles were consistent with constitutional guarantees. *Vishaka v State of Rajasthan* is a notable example, where international standards concerning discrimination and workplace equality assisted the Court in developing guidelines for protection against sexual harassment. International instruments therefore provide not only external standards but also a useful comparative framework for evaluating the development and implementation of women's rights in India.¹¹

3.7 Important Judicial Decisions

Vishaka v State of Rajasthan (1997)

The *Vishaka* case arose in the context of sexual harassment of women at the workplace at a time when India did not have specific legislation dealing comprehensively with the issue. The Supreme Court recognised that workplace sexual harassment could seriously affect a woman's constitutional rights to equality, freedom and dignity. The Court formulated guidelines for the prevention and redressal of sexual harassment. These guidelines remained an important source of protection until Parliament enacted the 2013 workplace sexual-harassment legislation. The judgment is therefore significant for demonstrating how constitutional principles can respond to emerging forms of rights violations.

Githa Hariharan v Reserve Bank of India (1999)

In *Githa Hariharan*, the Supreme Court examined the legal position of mothers and fathers in relation to guardianship. The Court adopted an interpretation that did not automatically place the father in a superior legal position to the mother. The decision is relevant to women's equality because it challenged traditional assumptions regarding parental authority and recognised the importance of interpreting personal-law provisions consistently with constitutional equality. It illustrates the role of constitutional interpretation in addressing gender-based assumptions embedded within legal structures.

¹¹ Indira Jaising, *Law Relating to Sexual Harassment at the Workplace* (Universal Law Publishing 2014). Flavia Agnes, Sudhir Chandra and Monmayee Basu, *Women and Law in India* (Oxford University Press 2016).

Anuj Garg v Hotel Association of India (2008)

The case concerned restrictions on the employment of women in establishments where alcohol was served. The Supreme Court questioned the assumption that women could be protected from social risks simply by excluding them from particular forms of employment.

The judgment is significant because it distinguished genuine protective measures from rules based upon stereotypes about women's vulnerability. The Court emphasised that measures introduced in the name of protection should not themselves become a means of restricting women's freedom, employment opportunities or equal participation.

Suchita Srivastava v Chandigarh Administration (2009)

In Suchita Srivastava, the Supreme Court considered issues relating to reproductive choice and personal autonomy. The Court recognised reproductive choice as an important aspect of personal liberty protected under Article 21.

The judgment is important in the development of Indian jurisprudence concerning bodily autonomy. It supports the principle that decisions concerning reproduction involve deeply personal choices and that women must be treated as autonomous individuals capable of making decisions concerning their own bodies and lives.

Shayara Bano v Union of India (2017)

The Supreme Court considered the validity of the practice of instant triple talaq in Shayara Bano. The decision is significant in the context of women's rights within personal-law systems because it raised questions concerning equality, constitutional protection and practices affecting women's status within marriage. The case illustrates the complex relationship between personal law, individual rights and constitutional principles. It also demonstrates the continuing importance of constitutional scrutiny when legal or social practices have unequal consequences for women.

K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) v Union of India (2017)

The Supreme Court's decision in K.S. Puttaswamy established privacy as a fundamental right protected by the Constitution. The judgment recognised that privacy is closely connected with dignity, autonomy and individual choice. For women's human rights, the principle of privacy has considerable significance. It is relevant to reproductive decisions, intimate relationships, medical choices, bodily integrity and the control of personal information. The judgment therefore strengthened the constitutional understanding of women as individuals entitled to make important personal decisions free from unjustified interference.¹²

¹² Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023, Act No 45 of 2023.

CHAPTER IV– CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

The Constitution of India provides women with a strong framework of equality, liberty, dignity and personal freedom. However, the existence of constitutional rights does not always guarantee their effective enjoyment in everyday life. Social expectations, economic dependence, institutional practices, lack of awareness and difficulties in accessing legal remedies can prevent women from fully exercising rights that are formally guaranteed to them. This chapter examines the major constitutional protections available to women and the contemporary challenges that continue to affect their meaningful enjoyment.

4.1 Women's Rights and Article 14

Article 14 of the Constitution provides the basic guarantee of equality before the law and equal protection of the laws. In the context of women's rights, this provision requires the State to ensure that laws and governmental actions do not create arbitrary or unjustified forms of discrimination. Equality cannot be understood merely by asking whether the same rule is applied to everyone; it is also necessary to consider whether the rule operates fairly in the circumstances in which people live. Contemporary constitutional jurisprudence has therefore moved towards an understanding of substantive equality. A provision may appear neutral on its face but may nevertheless place women at a disadvantage because of existing social or institutional conditions. The decisions in *Secretary, Ministry of Defence v Babita Puniya* and *Lt Col Nitisha v Union of India* illustrate the importance of looking beyond the wording of a rule and examining its actual consequences for women. Article 14 consequently operates not only as a protection against obvious discrimination but also as a constitutional tool for identifying practices and institutional arrangements that may preserve existing patterns of gender inequality. Its significance lies in ensuring that equality becomes a practical reality rather than remaining only a formal promise.

4.2 Women's Rights and Article 15

Article 15(1) prohibits the State from discriminating against individuals on specified grounds, including sex. At the same time, Article 15(3) expressly permits the State to make special provisions for women and children. These provisions reflect the constitutional understanding that achieving genuine equality may sometimes require measures specifically directed towards

groups that have historically experienced disadvantage. The important question is whether a particular protective measure actually promotes equality or instead limits women's opportunities by relying upon traditional assumptions about their vulnerability. In *Anuj Garg v Hotel Association of India*, the Supreme Court examined this distinction and questioned restrictions that claimed to protect women while simultaneously preventing them from accessing employment opportunities. Article 15 can therefore support measures directed towards the particular circumstances faced by women, including maternity protection, workplace safety and measures addressing violence and exploitation. However, such measures should be designed to expand women's opportunities and freedom rather than reinforce the idea that women require exclusion or control for their own protection.¹³

4.3 Women's Rights and Article 21

Article 21 has become one of the most significant constitutional provisions in the development of women's human rights in India. Although the provision refers to life and personal liberty, judicial interpretation has given these expressions a wider meaning that includes dignity, personal autonomy and the ability to live a life free from unjustified interference. The importance of Article 21 can be seen in cases concerning reproductive choice, privacy, marital relationships and protection from violence. Constitutional protection does not depend upon a woman's identity as a daughter, wife, mother or any other social role. She is entitled to be recognised as an individual with her own rights, choices and aspirations. Article 21 is also relevant where women experience violence, degrading treatment or interference with their bodily integrity. The State has a responsibility not only to refrain from arbitrary interference with personal liberty but also to establish effective legal and institutional mechanisms through which violations can be addressed. The development of Article 21 jurisprudence therefore demonstrates the close relationship between life, dignity, liberty and autonomy. These principles are particularly important in understanding women as independent constitutional persons rather than merely members of a family or social group.

4.4 Right to Privacy, Dignity and Bodily Autonomy

The constitutional recognition of privacy has strengthened the protection of personal decision-making and intimate aspects of individual life. For women, privacy has particular importance

¹³ *Sandra Fredman, *Discrimination Law* (2nd edn, Oxford University Press 2011).

* Rebecca J Cook and Simone Cusack, *Gender Stereotyping: Transnational Legal Perspectives* (University of Pennsylvania Press 2010).

in matters involving reproductive choices, medical treatment, intimate relationships, sexual autonomy and personal information. Bodily autonomy is closely connected with the constitutional value of dignity. A woman's body should not be treated as an object that can be controlled by family members, social institutions or the State without a legitimate legal basis. The reasoning developed in *K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) v Union of India* and *Suchita Srivastava v Chandigarh Administration* provides an important foundation for understanding personal autonomy within Article 21. Recognition of autonomy does not mean that every individual choice is beyond legal regulation. Constitutional rights operate within a legal framework that may permit reasonable and lawful restrictions. Courts may therefore be required to consider the relationship between individual freedom and legitimate public interests. Nevertheless, any restriction affecting intimate personal decisions must be examined carefully because such decisions are closely connected with dignity, identity and individual freedom. The constitutional approach increasingly recognises women as persons entitled to participate in decisions concerning their own bodies and lives.¹⁴

4.5 Gender Discrimination and Social Inequality

The legal recognition of equality exists within a social environment in which women may continue to experience unequal access to education, employment, healthcare, property, technology and political or public participation. Consequently, the practical enjoyment of a legal right may depend upon social and economic circumstances. Gender discrimination may also interact with other forms of disadvantage. A woman's experience of inequality may be influenced by factors such as caste, class, disability, age, geographical location, marital status and economic position. These circumstances can overlap and create barriers that cannot always be understood by examining gender discrimination in isolation. For this reason, substantive equality requires institutions to look beyond formal rules and identify the practical obstacles that prevent women from exercising their rights. Legal reform must therefore be accompanied by appropriate education, institutional awareness, professional training and accessible public services. A rights-based approach should recognise the diversity of women's experiences. Measures that are effective for one group may not necessarily address the difficulties faced by women living in different social or economic circumstances. Meaningful equality requires attention to these differences while maintaining the common constitutional commitment to equal dignity.

¹⁴ Sandra Fredman, *Discrimination Law* (2nd edn, Oxford University Press 2011).
Flavia Agnes, *Law and Gender Inequality: The Politics of Women's Rights in India* (Oxford University Press 2001).

4.6 Violence against Women

Violence against women continues to present a serious challenge to the enjoyment of fundamental rights. Domestic violence, sexual violence, trafficking, harassment and other forms of abuse can affect a woman's physical and psychological security as well as her dignity, liberty and ability to participate equally in society. Different forms of violence require different legal and institutional responses. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 provides civil and protective remedies in domestic relationships, while criminal law addresses conduct that constitutes criminal offences. Other specialised laws may also become applicable depending upon the nature and circumstances of the violation. Legal protection alone, however, cannot completely address the problem. Effective prevention requires awareness regarding women's rights, accessible support services, sensitive institutional responses, medical assistance, shelter facilities and legal aid. Women should be able to report violence without being discouraged by fear, social pressure or financial dependence. A human-rights approach therefore places emphasis not only on punishment after violence occurs but also on prevention, protection, rehabilitation and access to effective remedies. The dignity of survivors should remain central throughout the legal and institutional process.¹⁵

CHAPTER V – CRITICAL ANALYSIS, FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS

This chapter examines the development of women's human rights in India from a critical perspective. Although the Constitution, legislation and judicial decisions have created an extensive framework for protecting women, the existence of legal rights does not always ensure their effective enjoyment in everyday life. The actual experience of women is influenced by social attitudes, economic circumstances, institutional practices and access to justice. The chapter therefore considers both the progress achieved through law and the challenges that continue to affect the implementation of women's human rights.

5.1 Effectiveness of the Existing Legal Framework

India has established a wide-ranging legal framework for the protection of women's human rights. The Constitution provides the fundamental guarantees of equality, non-discrimination, dignity and personal liberty. In addition, specific legislation addresses particular forms of harm and inequality, including domestic violence and sexual harassment at the workplace. The

¹⁵ *Upendra Baxi, *The Future of Human Rights* (3rd edn, Oxford University Press 2008).

* Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford University Press 1999).

Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 also provides criminal-law protection against various offences affecting women. The contribution of the judiciary has further strengthened this framework. Through constitutional interpretation, the courts have developed important principles relating to substantive equality, dignity, privacy, bodily autonomy and protection against gender stereotypes. Judicial decisions have demonstrated that constitutional rights can be interpreted in a manner that responds to changing social circumstances and emerging forms of discrimination. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of a legal framework cannot be measured simply by counting the number of laws that have been enacted. A right becomes meaningful only when people are aware of it and can realistically use the remedies available to them. Effective implementation therefore depends upon factors such as public awareness, institutional compliance, accessible procedures, competent investigation, timely adjudication and enforcement of decisions. There is consequently an important distinction between legal recognition and practical realization. India has made considerable progress in recognising women's rights in law, but the continuing challenge is to ensure that these rights are experienced in practice by women from different social and economic backgrounds.¹⁶

5.2 Gaps in the Protection of Women's Human Rights

Despite the development of an extensive legal framework, several gaps continue to affect the protection of women's human rights. One significant difficulty is the lack of awareness about legal rights and available remedies. A woman may have a statutory or constitutional entitlement but may not know where to seek assistance or how to begin the relevant legal process. Institutional effectiveness is another concern. Complaint committees, protection mechanisms and other legal institutions may exist formally but may not function with the same level of efficiency or accessibility in every location. The quality of implementation can depend upon available resources, training, administrative support and institutional attitudes. Economic and social dependence can create additional difficulties. Women who depend upon family members for financial support may hesitate to pursue legal remedies when doing so could affect their housing, employment, family relationships or economic security. Fear of social stigma and retaliation may further discourage women from reporting violations. Delay is another important concern. When proceedings continue for long periods, the relief ultimately granted may lose some of its practical value. Timely access to justice is therefore an essential part of meaningful

¹⁶ *UN Women, information on women's rights, gender equality and empowerment. UN Women [online].

*Sandra Fredman, 'Substantive Equality Revisited' (2016) 14(1) International Journal of Constitutional Law 712.

rights protection The legal system can also appear fragmented from the perspective of a person seeking assistance. A single situation may involve constitutional rights, criminal law, family law, labour law, welfare measures and civil remedies at the same time. When different institutions operate separately, women may find it difficult to understand which remedy is available and which authority should be approached. Another continuing concern is structural discrimination. Discrimination does not always appear through an explicit rule treating women differently. It can also arise from apparently neutral policies, institutional practices or social expectations that have unequal consequences. Addressing such forms of disadvantage requires a broader understanding of substantive equality.¹⁷

5.3 Role of the Judiciary in Developing Women's Rights Jurisprudence

The Indian judiciary has played an important role in shaping the constitutional understanding of women's human rights. Through judicial interpretation, constitutional provisions have been applied to circumstances that were not always specifically contemplated when the Constitution or earlier legislation was framed. The decision in *Vishaka v State of Rajasthan* is an important illustration. At a time when there was no comprehensive legislation dealing with sexual harassment at the workplace, the Supreme Court developed guidelines based on constitutional rights and international human-rights principles. The decision demonstrated how constitutional interpretation could provide protection where existing legislation was inadequate. Subsequent judgments have further developed principles relating to autonomy, privacy, dignity and substantive equality. Decisions such as *Joseph Shine v Union of India*, *Secretary, Ministry of Defence v Babita Puniya*, *Vineeta Sharma v Rakesh Sharma* and *Lt Col Nitisha v Union of India* demonstrate judicial engagement with gender stereotypes, unequal opportunities and structural forms of disadvantage. The role of the judiciary, however, has certain institutional limits. Courts can interpret constitutional provisions, invalidate unlawful practices and provide remedies in appropriate cases, but they cannot by themselves resolve every social or institutional barrier faced by women. Sustainable change requires cooperation between the judiciary, legislature, executive authorities and institutions responsible for implementing laws. Judicial decisions are therefore an important part of the development of women's rights, but their principles must be translated into practical institutional measures if they are to produce lasting change.

¹⁷ *Constitution of India, arts 14, 15, 16 and 21.

*Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, ss 3, 17–23. The official text is available through India Code^[66]

5.4 Contemporary Issues in Women's Human Rights

Women's human-rights concerns continue to develop alongside changes in society and technology. Contemporary issues include online harassment, misuse of personal information, digital surveillance, reproductive autonomy, workplace discrimination, unequal responsibility for unpaid care work, access to healthcare, economic participation, political representation and different forms of violence. The expansion of digital communication has created new opportunities for women but has also produced new forms of harassment and abuse. Online threats, non-consensual dissemination of private material, cyberstalking and other forms of digital misconduct may affect women's privacy, dignity and freedom. These developments require legal and institutional mechanisms capable of responding to technological changes. At the same time, legal responses to online harms must be carefully designed. Protection from abuse should be balanced with constitutionally protected freedoms, including freedom of speech and expression. Regulation should therefore address genuine harm without unnecessarily restricting legitimate communication. Reproductive autonomy and bodily decision-making also remain important areas of contemporary constitutional discussion. The development of privacy and dignity jurisprudence has strengthened the constitutional recognition of individual decision-making, but practical access to healthcare and reproductive services remains important for making such rights meaningful. Another significant concern is the design of institutions from a gender-sensitive perspective. Police stations, courts, hospitals, workplaces and complaint mechanisms should be structured in ways that allow women to approach them without unnecessary fear, humiliation or procedural difficulty. An institution may comply with the formal requirements of law while still being inaccessible to the people it is intended to protect.¹⁸

5.5 Comparative International Perspective

International human-rights standards provide an important reference point for understanding the development of women's rights in India. CEDAW, in particular, establishes international standards concerning the elimination of discrimination against women and encourages States to take appropriate legal and institutional measures to promote equality. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action also identifies several important areas of concern, including violence

¹⁸ United Nations Treaty Collection, official database containing treaty texts and participation information. United Nations Treaty Collection^[66]

* UN Women, 'About UN Women', explaining its institutional role in advancing women's rights, gender equality and empowerment. About UN Women^[67]

against women, education, healthcare, economic participation and participation in decision-making. These international frameworks can assist in identifying areas where legal and institutional development may be required. Indian constitutional law shares several principles with international human-rights standards, particularly the values of equality, dignity and non-discrimination. At the same time, the Indian Constitution contains its own distinctive provisions. Article 15(3), for example, expressly permits special provisions for women and children. Comparative analysis should nevertheless be undertaken with care. A legal model developed in another country cannot automatically be transferred to India because constitutional structures, legal institutions, social conditions and cultural circumstances may differ. International standards are most useful when they provide principles that can be thoughtfully adapted to the Indian constitutional and institutional context. Thus, international law should not be viewed merely as an external model to be copied. It can instead serve as a source of guidance for identifying good practices and strengthening domestic protection while respecting the framework of the Indian Constitution.¹⁹

5.6 Major Findings

The examination of constitutional provisions, legislation, judicial decisions and implementation challenges leads to the following findings:

- The Constitution of India provides a strong foundation for women's human rights through guarantees of equality, non-discrimination, dignity, liberty and related constitutional protections.
- Indian constitutional jurisprudence has gradually moved beyond a narrow understanding of formal equality towards substantive equality, with greater attention to gender stereotypes and structural disadvantage.
- Judicial decisions have significantly contributed to the development of principles concerning dignity, privacy, bodily autonomy and women's status as equal constitutional persons.
- Special legislation dealing with domestic violence and workplace sexual harassment has expanded the range of remedies available to women beyond general constitutional protections.
- International instruments, particularly CEDAW, provide useful standards for

¹⁹ *Ministry of Home Affairs – for the new criminal laws including BNS: Ministry of Home Affairs^[66]

*United Nations Treaty Collection – for CEDAW and other international treaties: UN Treaty Collection^[66]

understanding discrimination and evaluating the development of women's rights in India.

- Despite considerable legal development, the practical enjoyment of rights continues to be affected by lack of awareness, social attitudes, economic dependence, institutional limitations and delays in obtaining remedies.
- Effective protection requires cooperation between courts, police authorities, workplaces, healthcare institutions, welfare agencies, legal-aid organisations and other relevant bodies.
- Legislation alone cannot eliminate gender inequality. Legal protection must be supported by education, institutional accountability, effective implementation and changes in social attitudes.
- The continuing development of women's human rights requires attention to new forms of discrimination and violence arising from technological, economic and social changes.²⁰

5.7 Suggestions and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following measures may contribute to strengthening the protection and realization of women's human rights in India:

- Strengthen legal awareness: Legal-literacy programmes should be expanded so that women are aware of their constitutional and statutory rights and understand where and how appropriate remedies can be sought.
- Improve workplace mechanisms: Internal Committees and Local Committees established under the workplace sexual-harassment framework should be regularly monitored to ensure that they are functioning effectively and independently.
- Strengthen domestic-violence mechanisms: Protection Officers and other officials responsible for assisting women facing domestic violence should receive adequate training, staffing and institutional support.
- Provide accessible support: Women seeking legal remedies should have access to legal aid, counselling, healthcare, shelter and other support services where necessary.
- Develop gender-sensitive institutions: Police personnel, judicial officers, public officials and institutional administrators should receive continuing training concerning

²⁰ *Legal Services Authorities Act 1987.

*Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005.

gender equality, constitutional rights and appropriate responses to complaints.

- Improve institutional coordination: Where a particular situation involves criminal, civil, family, labour or welfare laws simultaneously, relevant institutions should develop mechanisms for better coordination so that women are not required to navigate unnecessarily complicated procedures.

CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION

The study of women's human rights in India shows that the law has travelled a considerable distance from the idea of women as passive beneficiaries of protection to the recognition of women as equal holders of rights. The Constitution provides a strong foundation through equality, non-discrimination, dignity, liberty and equal opportunity. Over time, legislation and judicial decisions have further developed these principles in areas such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, reproductive autonomy, property rights, privacy and participation in public and professional life. At the same time, the existence of legal rights does not always mean that those rights are experienced in everyday life. Many women continue to face social restrictions, economic dependence, lack of awareness, violence, discrimination and difficulties in approaching legal institutions. In several situations, the problem is not the complete absence of a legal remedy, but the difficulty of making that remedy accessible, timely and meaningful. This shows that the protection of women's human rights cannot be measured only by the number of laws enacted or judgments delivered. The judiciary has played an important role in giving practical meaning to constitutional equality. Decisions such as *Vishaka v State of Rajasthan*, *Suchita Srivastava v Chandigarh Administration*, *K S Puttaswamy v Union of India*, *Joseph Shine v Union of India*, *Secretary, Ministry of Defence v Babita Puniya*, *Vineeta Sharma v Rakesh Sharma* and *Lt Col Nitisha v Union of India* demonstrate the gradual development of a rights-based understanding of gender equality. These decisions have also helped move the legal discussion beyond formal equality towards dignity, autonomy and substantive equality. The study also makes clear that women's human rights are closely connected with the social and economic conditions in which women live. Equality before law becomes meaningful only when women are able to access education, employment, healthcare, property, legal assistance and public institutions without discrimination. Similarly, protection from violence requires more than criminal provisions. It requires responsive institutions, awareness, support systems and an environment in which women can seek help without fear or social pressure. The international human rights framework, particularly CEDAW and the

Beijing Platform for Action, has also contributed to the development of women's rights discourse in India. However, international principles become meaningful only when they are translated into effective national laws, policies and institutional practices. Indian legal development therefore needs to remain attentive both to international human rights standards and to the social realities within which Indian women experience inequality. Ultimately, the protection of women's human rights is not a task that can be completed merely through legislation. Law is an important instrument of social change, but its effectiveness depends upon implementation, public awareness, institutional accountability and gradual transformation of social attitudes. A woman should not have to possess exceptional knowledge, financial resources or social support merely to enjoy rights that the Constitution already promises her. The real measure of progress, therefore, lies not only in what the law declares but in what women are able to experience in their everyday lives. The continuing challenge for India is to bridge the distance between rights on paper and rights in practice.

