

The Agenda–Instrument Gap in SDG 5: An Intersectional, Cross-Context Assessment

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines global implementation of SDG 5 through an integrated lens of intersectionality, postcolonial and feminist theory, Critical Race Theory, and social justice/capabilities frameworks. Using a qualitative multiple case approach and secondary data across India, Nepal, Ghana, South Africa, and the United States, it identifies persistent gaps between gender rhetoric and redistributive instruments; crisis guidance that recognizes harms yet avoids macro structural reform; and capability constraints shaped by disability and place. Findings highlight unpaid care burdens, racialized and caste-based exclusions, and urban-centric leadership pipelines that reproduce inequality despite formal commitments. The paper advances a reform agenda: disaggregated, context sensitive metrics; participatory co-design with marginalized communities; protection for informal labor and care work; and resource backed, accountable governance. Achieving SDG 5 requires coupling recognition with redistribution and centering substantive outcomes such as autonomy, dignity, safety, and equitable access rather than representational counts.

1. Introduction

Adopted by the United Nations in 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent an ambitious agenda to eradicate poverty, reduce systemic inequalities, and promote human rights. Among the seventeen goals, SDG 5, achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, is foundational to inclusive, sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). It intersects with other goals related to food security, healthcare, education, employment, and political participation. Although progress has occurred in areas like mobile connectivity and child health, such advancements often bypass structurally disadvantaged groups (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024). Contemporary evidence reinforces this concern: discourse within development aid increasingly invokes “gender” after 2015 without commensurate redistribution or power reconfiguration (Vandeskog & Buts, 2025);

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even high-profile crisis policy guidance has recognized gendered harms while stopping short of systemic macro-policy shifts (Herten-Crabb et al., 2025); and women with disabilities navigate poverty through context-specific strategies shaped by rural–urban infrastructures and ableist labor markets, illustrating how aggregate indicators can obscure layered constraints (Woyo et al., 2025).

SDG 5 comprises nine targets, including the elimination of discrimination (Target 5.1), violence (5.2), and harmful practices (5.3); recognition of unpaid labor (5.4); equal participation in leadership (5.5); access to reproductive rights (5.6); and equitable access to resources (Targets 5.a–5.c) (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.). Despite these commitments, implementation remains unequal, particularly for women from indigenous, caste-oppressed, racialized, disabled, or economically marginalized backgrounds, populations for whom the evidence above demonstrates persistent gaps between rhetorical salience and material transformation (Herten-Crabb et al., 2025; Vandeskog & Buts, 2025; Woyo et al., 2025).

Analyzing SDG 5 through intersectionality reveals how interlocking identities such as race, caste, class, disability, and gender produce layered exclusions (Crenshaw, 1989). Critical Race Theory highlights institutionalized racial biases (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), while postcolonial critiques (Fanon, 1963; Spivak, 1988) reveal how development discourse often reproduces colonial hierarchies by speaking for rather than with the marginalized. Spivak’s notion of the subaltern exposes the structural erasure of marginalized voices in dominant narratives (Spivak, 1988). Feminist perspectives deepen this critique: hooks (2000) underscores the erasure of race and class within liberal feminism, while Butler (2004) problematizes rigid gender binaries embedded in policy narratives. Situated empirical studies on aid discourse (Vandeskog & Buts, 2025), multilateral policy responses (Herten-Crabb et al., 2025), and the everyday agency of women with disabilities across rural and urban contexts (Woyo et al., 2025) supply contemporary anchors for these theoretical claims.

Moreover, social justice theories reframe SDG 5 through a lens of substantive, rather than merely formal, equality. Rawls’ (1971) concept of justice as fairness and Nussbaum’s (2006) capabilities approach stress the need to evaluate justice through real-life access to dignity and opportunity, not just stated policy goals. Read alongside recent evidence on discursive inflation without structural levers (Vandeskog & Buts, 2025), incremental yet non-transformative guidance (Herten-Crabb et al., 2025), and disability-specific barriers (Woyo et al., 2025), the capabilities lens clarifies why disaggregated, power-aware metrics are indispensable.

This study conceptualizes the agenda–instrument gap as the disconnect between the rhetorical commitments articulated in global and national gender agendas and the practical instruments such as financing, institutional capacity, enforcement mechanisms, and accountability frameworks required to realize those commitments. Within SDG 5 implementation, this gap is visible when governments and international agencies adopt progressive gender language or formal equality laws without corresponding redistributive or structural reforms. Defining this gap provides an analytical anchor for the study, enabling systematic comparison of how policy ambitions are translated, or fail to translate, into enforceable, equity-driven outcomes across different contexts.

This study addresses a key gap by offering a multi-theoretical, context-sensitive analysis of SDG 5 implementation across diverse national and socio-political contexts. Existing literature often treats gender inequality in isolated policy silos, without synthesizing intersectional, postcolonial, feminist, and justice-based perspectives. This research interrogates how colonial legacies, cultural norms, and institutional mechanisms shape exclusionary outcomes and evaluates which theoretical models most accurately reflect lived experiences, now triangulated

with emerging empirical critiques of SDG-aligned discourse, multilateral policy design, and disability-mediated agency (Herten-Crabb et al., 2025; Vandeskog & Buts, 2025; Woyo et al., 2025).

The study's objective is to critically examine SDG 5 implementation, identify systemic barriers to inclusive gender progress, center marginalized voices through qualitative case studies, and offer actionable, locally grounded policy recommendations. It ultimately argues that achieving SDG 5 requires more than formal declarations. It demands a decolonial, justice-oriented vision that dismantles entrenched hierarchies and centers the agency of historically excluded communities.

2. Literature Review

Global efforts to implement Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) have advanced, yet outcomes remain fragmented and unequal, particularly for women from structurally marginalized communities. Scholars across disciplines have emphasized that SDG 5, when assessed through intersectional, postcolonial, feminist, critical race, and justice-oriented perspectives, often fails to address deep-rooted systems of exclusion that affect access to resources, recognition, and representation.

2.1 Intersectional Exclusions and Structural Barriers

Intersectionality offers a powerful lens to examine how gender interacts with race, caste, class, disability, and geography to shape inequality. Crenshaw's (1989) foundational critique of single-axis policy approaches underscores how women at the intersection of multiple identities often fall through policy gaps. Empirical evidence from South Africa illustrates how patriarchal systems combined with economic inequality prevent rural women from benefiting from gender mainstreaming policies (Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023), while lower-caste women in Nepal remain disproportionately subjected to structural violence and social exclusion, frequently overlooked in national SDG reporting (Dahal et al., 2022). In higher education and research sectors, minority women remain underrepresented in leadership roles, reflecting how structural barriers limit substantive progress (Rosa & Clavero, 2022). Recent disability-focused research further demonstrates how agency is constrained by ableist labor markets and infrastructural inequities across rural–urban divides, reinforcing the need for disaggregated monitoring within SDG 5 (Woyo et al., 2025).

2.2 Postcolonial Critiques and Epistemic Silencing

Postcolonial theorists have critiqued global development agendas for replicating colonial hierarchies and marginalizing local epistemologies. Spivak's (1988) concept of the subaltern underscores how dominant actors often speak for, rather than with, marginalized populations, while Fanon (1963) argues that colonial legacies persist in modern institutions through erasures of indigenous knowledge and values. Applying these critiques to SDG 5, scholars highlight how caste and gender exclusions silence Dalit women's voices in India (Rathee & Pareek, 2024), and how Western-centric paradigms in global feminist interventions can misread postcolonial contexts, producing blunt or counterproductive reforms (Mylonas & Tudor, 2021). Corpus-based analyses of development-aid discourse indicate a post-2015 surge in "gender" rhetoric that does not reliably translate into redistribution or structural power shifts, exemplifying discursive uptake without epistemic or institutional transformation (Vandeskog & Buts, 2025). In parallel, evaluations of multilateral crisis responses show recognition of

gendered harms but limited engagement with macro-structural levers, revealing a persistent agenda–instrument gap (Herten-Crabb et al., 2025).

2.3 Neglect of Gendered and Ecological Contributions

Many policies tied to SDG 5 focus on formal economic participation, overlooking unpaid and informal labor and the ecological work that sustains communities. Belingheri et al. (2021) critique the narrowness of gender research that privileges employment metrics over intersectional realities, while Sanz-Hernández et al. (2022) argue that women’s ecological labor remains invisible in bioeconomy debates. Food security studies further reveal how ethnic diversity and entrenched social hierarchies shape women’s vulnerability in Ghana (Koomson & Churchill, 2021) and how systemic racism produces persistent insecurity among African American women in the United States (Dennard et al., 2022). These lacunae echo broader patterns in SDG discourse, where gender salience increases without commensurate measurement of care work, informal economies, or capability constraints (Vandeskog & Buts, 2025), and where disability-mediated barriers compound material deprivation (Woyo et al., 2025).

2.4 Housing, Health, and Gender Justice

Access to housing and healthcare is central to gender equality, yet policy architectures often treat these as adjacent rather than integral to SDG 5. During the COVID-19 pandemic, housing precarity intensified among racialized communities, with disproportionate burdens for women of color (Chun et al., 2023), and housing conditions proved foundational to public health outcomes for marginalized populations (Keene & Blankenship, 2023). These findings align with Nussbaum’s (2006) capabilities approach, which insists that justice be assessed by real freedoms and outcomes. Disability-focused evidence similarly shows how unequal infrastructures and service design constrain women’s economic and health capabilities across place, underscoring the need to integrate housing and health indicators into gender equality monitoring (Woyo et al., 2025).

2.5 Global Metrics and Structural Invisibility

The United Nations frameworks (United Nations, 2015, 2024) have standardized progress indicators for SDG 5, yet reliance on aggregate data often conceals disparities among marginalized populations. Butler (2004) critiques binary gender frameworks embedded in policy discourse, and hooks (2000) urges a feminism attentive to class, race, and sexuality. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) expose how institutional racism is reproduced through ostensibly neutral mechanisms. Recent analyses of SDG-related discourse and policy reinforce this concern: rhetorical uptake of “gender” and crisis-oriented guidance have not been systematically coupled with distribution-sensitive, disaggregated metrics or with macroeconomic and governance reforms necessary for transformation (Herten-Crabb et al., 2025; Vandeskog & Buts, 2025).

2.6 Toward an Inclusive and Justice-Oriented Agenda

Despite notable advancements, the research landscape remains constrained by methodological and epistemic limits. Liberal feminist frameworks tend to emphasize representation without confronting deeper systems of oppression (hooks, 2000). In response, scholars call for participatory, decolonial approaches that foreground lived realities in knowledge production (Tseng, 2012), a priority echoed in policy guidance advocating context-sensitive, community-

informed measurement and interventions (UN Women, n.d.). Recent empirical contributions sharpen the agenda: they demonstrate how discursive momentum must be tied to resource-backed instruments (Vandeskog & Buts, 2025), how multilateral strategies should move beyond recognition to structural levers (Herten-Crabb et al., 2025), and how disability-sensitive and place-sensitive metrics are indispensable for capturing the capabilities of those most at risk of exclusion (Woyo et al., 2025).

In sum, the literature indicates that SDG 5 implementation risks reproducing structural inequalities unless it is grounded in intersectional, decolonial, and justice-based frameworks and operationalized through disaggregated, power-aware indicators. Realizing gender equality requires not only formal policy change but a reconstitution of epistemic hierarchies, institutional practices, and data infrastructures to center those most affected by exclusion.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a robust multi-theoretical framework that synthesizes five critical perspectives: intersectionality, postcolonial theory, feminist theory, critical race theory, and social justice theory. These perspectives collectively offer an expansive analytical lens to interrogate the global implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), with particular attention to its impact on historically marginalized populations. Each theory provides essential conceptual tools for critiquing formalist equality discourses and uncovering the embedded structures of power, exclusion, and resistance across diverse sociopolitical contexts.

3.1 Intersectionality: Mapping Interwoven Systems of Oppression

Intersectionality, first conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), illuminates how multiple axes of identity, such as gender, caste, class, race, and disability, converge to create complex layers of marginalization. Standardized gender policies under SDG 5 often obscure the nuanced realities of individuals facing multiple forms of marginalization, a concern underscored by intersectional analysis that emphasizes the importance of context-specific and identity-sensitive approaches (UN Women, n.d.; Woyo et al., 2025). For instance, policies that advance gender equality in employment (Target 5.1) may remain ineffective if they fail to confront caste-based exclusion in India or racial segregation in the United States. Empirical evidence from South Africa and Nepal (Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023; Dahal et al., 2022) reveals that gender mainstreaming initiatives often collapse when they disregard the intersecting realities of rural, low-income, or caste-subjugated women. Disability-focused research similarly shows how ableist labor markets and infrastructural inequities constrain agency across rural–urban divides (Woyo et al., 2025). Thus, intersectionality compels a shift toward context-specific, structurally aware strategies that recognize marginalized groups not as monoliths but as situated within unique matrices of oppression.

3.2 Postcolonial Theory: Uncovering Colonial Continuities in Gender Policy

Postcolonial theory interrogates how the enduring legacies of colonialism shape contemporary development paradigms, particularly within gender equality frameworks. Fanon (1963) explores how colonial violence imprints itself on institutional memory and sociopolitical configurations, while Spivak (1988) problematizes the tendency of dominant actors to speak for, rather than with, the subaltern. These critiques are pivotal when examining the epistemological underpinnings of SDG 5. The persistence of Eurocentric, universalist assumptions within SDG frameworks (Target 5.c) often results in interventions that marginalize Indigenous, caste-oppressed, or non-Western communities by failing to engage

with their epistemologies or lived realities (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, n.d.). Evidence of post-2015 discursive uptake of “gender” in aid without commensurate redistribution or power shifts further illustrates how colonial hierarchies can be reproduced through rhetoric rather than transformed through instruments (Vandeskog & Buts, 2025). Relatedly, assessments of multilateral crisis responses show that recognition of gendered harms often stops short of macro-structural reform, reinforcing the agenda–instrument gap (Herten-Crabb et al., 2025).

3.3 Feminist Theory: Deconstructing Gender Norms and Institutional Power

Feminist theory provides a critical vocabulary for unpacking how gender operates through institutional, cultural, and discursive structures. hooks (2000) critiques liberal feminist frameworks for emphasizing surface-level inclusion while often disregarding the deeper systemic inequalities shaped by the interrelations of race, class, and gender. Butler (2004) further destabilizes binary constructions of gender, challenging the foundational assumptions that underlie many international development indicators. In relation to SDG 5, feminist theory critiques superficial commitments to gender parity, such as leadership quotas (Target 5.5), that fail to address entrenched power relations in domains like unpaid labor (Target 5.4) and care work. Recent analyses of crisis policy guidance underscore this gap between recognition and structural levers (Herten-Crabb et al., 2025), while discursive audits caution against mistaking rhetorical salience for material transformation (Vandeskog & Buts, 2025).

3.4 Critical Race Theory: Tracing Structural Racism in Gender Interventions

Critical race theory (CRT) foregrounds the ways in which structural racism is embedded in seemingly neutral institutions, including legal and policy frameworks (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT interrogates how racialized women experience compounded disadvantages, even in contexts where formal equality is enshrined in law. Within the scope of SDG 5, CRT reveals how entrenched racial hierarchies shape disparities in access to essential resources such as housing, nutrition, healthcare, and economic opportunities, undermining equitable development (Target 5.a). The compounded effects of policy design that recognizes harms without altering macro structures (Herten-Crabb et al., 2025) and the intersection of disability with race and place in shaping agency and outcomes (Woyo et al., 2025) together exemplify how ostensibly neutral mechanisms reproduce racialized and gendered inequities.

3.5 Social Justice Theory: Advancing Substantive Equality through Capability

Social justice theory, particularly as articulated by Martha Nussbaum (2006), prioritizes substantive over formal equality. Her capabilities approach insists that genuine justice can only be assessed by examining individuals’ real freedoms to lead lives of dignity, rather than their nominal legal entitlements. In this framework, SDG 5 is evaluated not by participation metrics alone (Target 5.5) but by the quality and equity of outcomes. For example, workforce inclusion may have little transformative effect if working conditions remain exploitative or if educational access does not translate into safety from caste-based violence. Evidence of rhetorical inflation without resource-backed instruments (Vandeskog & Buts, 2025), recognition-oriented yet non-transformative guidance (Herten-Crabb et al., 2025), and capability constraints specific to disability and place (Woyo et al., 2025) collectively underscore the need for disaggregated, power-aware metrics and redistributive policies.

3.6 Synthesis: A Multi-Theoretical Lens for Gender Justice

Together, these five theoretical lenses offer a comprehensive and integrated model for analyzing the exclusions embedded in SDG 5 implementation. Intersectionality illuminates the multiplicity of oppression; postcolonial theory critiques the epistemic hierarchies in global governance; feminist theory interrogates patriarchal norms; critical race theory uncovers racialized inequities; and social justice theory shifts focus from access to substantive well-being. Read in concert with recent empirical critiques of SDG discourse, multilateral policy design, and disability-mediated agency, this synthesis advances a decolonial, justice-oriented analytical paradigm and a methodological foundation for locally grounded, equity-driven solutions (Herten-Crabb et al., 2025; Vandeskog & Buts, 2025; Woyo et al., 2025).

To consolidate the analytical integration of the five theoretical perspectives, Table 1 presents a summary aligning each lens with its primary focus, corresponding SDG 5 targets, and the specific implementation insights it enables. This visual framework clarifies how the multi-theoretical synthesis guides interpretation of gender equality outcomes across diverse contexts.

Table 1. Multi-Theoretical Framework Aligned with SDG 5 Targets (5.1–5.c)

Theoretical Lens	Key Analytical Focus	Relevant SDG 5 Targets	What This Lens Reveals in Implementation
Intersectionality	Intersecting identities shape unequal access, autonomy, and outcomes.	5.1, 5.2, 5.5, 5.6	Why aggregate indicators hide disparities linked to caste, race, class, disability, and place.
Postcolonial / Decolonial Feminism	Global policy often reproduces colonial and elite epistemic hierarchies.	5.c (policy & governance)	Why reforms may be symbolic, externally framed, or inattentive to community knowledge.
Feminist Theory	Patriarchal norms structure labor, care, embodiment, and leadership.	5.4, 5.5	Why unpaid care remains unrecognized and leadership pipelines benefit only urban elites.
Critical Race Theory	Racism is embedded in institutions and resource distribution.	5.1, 5.2, 5. a	Why racialized/ethnic minority women face persistent disparities in food, housing, and labor access.
Capabilities / Social Justice Approach	Equality must be assessed in terms of lived dignity, autonomy, and safety.	All targets (5.1–5.c)	Why representation alone is insufficient; outcomes must be substantively redistributive and enabling.

4. Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology informed by critical theory and interpretivist paradigms to examine the global implementation of SDG 5: Gender Equality, with particular attention to historically marginalized communities. Grounded in intersectional, postcolonial, feminist, critical race, and social justice perspectives, the methodology centers structural forms of inequality and guides the interpretive analysis of policy outcomes across diverse socio-political contexts.

4.1. Research Design

A multiple case study design was employed to facilitate an in-depth, context-sensitive examination of SDG 5 implementation across South Africa, Nepal, Ghana, India, and the United States. These countries were selected purposefully to reflect variation in governance systems, socio-economic structures, regional location, and historical legacies of inequality. They also provide sufficient high-quality secondary data documenting gender disparities, implementation challenges, and institutional conditions relevant to SDG 5 (Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023; Dahal et al., 2022; Koomson & Churchill, 2021). This design supports comparative insight into how localized structural factors shape progress and reinforce agenda-instrument gaps.

4.2. Data Collection

Data were drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, UN progress reports, national gender-policy documents, NGO evaluations, and previously published qualitative studies. Literature published between 2012 and 2025 was reviewed to capture both the historical development and contemporary implementation of SDG 5. Searches were conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar using combinations of keywords such as “SDG 5 implementation,” “intersectional inequality,” “unpaid care work,” “postcolonial feminism,” “policy instruments,” and “gendered capabilities.”

Search Yield and Screening

- **Initial records retrieved:** 198
- **Duplicates removed:** 28
- **Records screened (title/abstract):** 170
- **Excluded at screening:** 110 (irrelevant focus, descriptive-only content, or lack of structural analysis)
- **Full-text articles assessed:** 60
- **Final included studies:** 26, consisting of empirical research articles, UN/government policy reports, and NGO evaluations that directly informed the Findings.

Inclusion criteria

- Engagement with SDG 5 or structural gender inequality
- Empirical or interpretive analysis relevant to marginalized groups
- Sufficient contextual detail for cross-case comparison

Exclusion criteria

- Purely descriptive or promotional policy summaries
- Insufficient methodological depth
- Lack of attention to structural or intersectional inequalities

This multi-source approach strengthened triangulation and interpretive credibility (Dennard et al., 2022; Chun et al., 2023).

4.3. Data Extraction

Each included source was entered into a structured evidence matrix documenting:

- the SDG 5 target(s) addressed,
- policy instruments implemented or discussed,
- reported implementation outcomes, and
- structural or institutional barriers identified.

This analytical structure enabled systematic identification of the agenda–instrument gap, allowing comparison across all cases.

4.4. Reliability and Validation

Given the single-coder design, reliability was ensured through internal consistency procedures rather than intercoder reliability. The researcher conducted:

- Iterative coding checks, revisiting earlier coded material after theme development;
- Analytic memo writing to justify coding decisions and theme boundaries;
- Cross-validation against the theoretical framework to maintain interpretive coherence;
- Triangulation across academic, NGO, and policy sources to confirm convergence of evidence.

These strategies strengthened methodological transparency and rigor, ensuring the reliability and suitability of the single-coder qualitative design.

4.5. Limitations

Since the study relies solely on secondary data, it cannot directly capture localized lived experiences and may reflect the interpretive biases of original authors. Although triangulation and theoretical grounding mitigate these limitations, future research should incorporate participatory, community-based, and ethnographic approaches to deepen contextual understanding.

4.6. Data Analysis

A hybrid thematic analysis was conducted using deductive codes derived from intersectional, postcolonial, feminist, critical race, and social justice theories, alongside inductive codes generated through iterative engagement with the material. Major themes included unpaid care burdens, caste and race-based exclusion, reproductive autonomy constraints, epistemic exclusion, policy tokenism, and intersectional invisibility. Each country case was evaluated against SDG 5 Targets 5.1–5.6 and 5.a–5.c to identify divergences between stated commitments and observed implementation.

4.7. Ethical Considerations

Although no human participants were involved, ethical rigor was maintained through accurate citation, contextual sensitivity, and deliberate centering of marginalized perspectives. The

study follows feminist and decolonial ethical principles, avoiding epistemic appropriation and recognizing community-grounded knowledge as a legitimate site of theorization.

4.8. Justification of Methodology

A qualitative, theory-driven methodology is essential for illuminating the structural, historical, and intersectional dynamics shaping SDG 5 outcomes, dimensions often obscured by aggregate indicators or technocratic reporting (Belingheri et al., 2021; Sanz-Hernández et al., 2022). By integrating critiques of discursive and instrumental gaps, crisis-response limitations, and disability and place-contingent capability constraints (Vandeskog & Buts, 2025; Herten-Crabb et al., 2025; Woyo et al., 2025), this approach provides deeper explanatory power and yields policy-relevant insights for advancing a decolonial, justice-oriented vision of gender equality.

5. Findings and Analysis

This section presents the patterns that emerged from the thematic analysis of secondary case study materials, highlighting how SDG 5 implementation either advances or limits gender equality across contexts. The findings are organized according to the study's multi-theoretical framework, which draws attention to the structural, historical, and spatial dynamics that shape differential outcomes.

5.1. Intersectional Invisibility in Policy Design

Across all five country cases, gender policies frequently failed to recognize how caste, class, race, disability, and geography intersect to deepen marginalization. In Nepal, for instance, rural and Dalit women remain largely invisible in SDG reporting due to urban-centric data practices (Dahal et al., 2022; United Nations Nepal, n.d.), while in India, the absence of labor protections that acknowledge caste-based vulnerabilities continues to exclude Dalit women from formal employment (Rathee & Pareek, 2024). Despite these shortcomings, some municipalities in Nepal have begun experimenting with community-based monitoring structures that include Dalit women as decision-making participants. These locally designed mechanisms indicate that greater intersectional visibility is possible when data systems engage community actors and move beyond uniform reporting templates.

5.2. Colonial Legacies and Global Feminist Interventions

Postcolonial dynamics shape the uneven implementation of SDG 5, particularly in contexts where governance models and gender policies retain Eurocentric assumptions. In South Africa, post-apartheid reforms continue to reflect external frameworks rather than Indigenous gender norms (Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023), and international NGO programs often reproduce top-down interventions that echo Spivak's (1988) critique of speaking for the subaltern. Development-aid discourse has become more gender-salient since 2015, yet this rhetorical momentum rarely includes redistributive financing or enforcement mechanisms (Vandeskog & Buts, 2025). Even so, some South African municipalities have achieved modest success through gender-responsive budgeting pilots that redirected local spending based on community consultations. These outcomes suggest that when reforms shift from externally imposed templates to locally informed processes, they are more capable of addressing structural inequities.

5.3. Gendered Labor and Care Work Inequities

Despite Targets 5.4 and 5.5 emphasizing the recognition of unpaid care work and inclusive leadership, national progress reports largely overlook unpaid domestic labor, constraining women's ability to participate in formal economies. Evidence from Nepal and Ghana shows that rural women shoulder disproportionate care burdens that limit work opportunities (Dahal et al., 2022; Koomson & Churchill, 2021; Owoo & Lambon-Quayefio, 2021), while leadership initiatives tend to elevate urban, middle-class women, reproducing socio-economic stratification (Rosa & Clavero, 2022). Although these constraints are widespread, some Ghanaian community programs integrating childcare services into livelihood projects have enabled rural women to participate in cooperative enterprises with fewer time burdens. These initiatives illustrate how service-level adjustments can mitigate care-induced exclusion when they are designed with attention to local labor conditions.

5.4. Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Access to Resources

Racialized structures significantly affect SDG 5 outcomes related to economic resources and essential services. In the United States, African American women experience heightened housing precarity and food insecurity due to historic segregation and systemic racism (Dennard et al., 2022; Chun et al., 2023), while in Ghana, ethnic minorities report disproportionately limited access to food, reflecting entrenched social hierarchies (Koomson & Churchill, 2021). These patterns show that formal commitments under Target 5.a have not translated into equitable resource distribution. At the same time, certain U.S. states implementing streamlined benefit recertification and targeted childcare subsidies have documented reductions in food insecurity among low-income women, indicating that administrative reforms can meaningfully improve outcomes when aligned with racialized needs.

5.5. Disability, Place, and Constrained Agency

Women with disabilities across rural and urban settings face persistent constraints shaped by infrastructural inaccessibility, ableist labor markets, and inadequate service design. Rural women often navigate more severe barriers, including limited transportation, fewer accessible services, and constrained employment opportunities (Woyo et al., 2025). National SDG 5 indicators seldom integrate disability or place as analytic categories, obscuring these disparities. Yet in some districts of Nepal, collaborations between disability organizations and local governments have expanded mobile health outreach to remote areas, reducing travel burdens and making basic services more accessible. These small-scale initiatives demonstrate that disability and place-sensitive implementation is feasible when designed with community input and flexible delivery models.

5.6. Justice-Based Evaluation of Policy Outcomes

Viewed through a capabilities lens, many national SDG 5 indicators measure representation or participation without assessing whether women experience improvements in dignity, safety, autonomy, or economic security. In the U.S., Ghana, Nepal, and India, aggregate reporting frequently masks outcome disparities affecting marginalized groups, especially where racial, caste-based, or disability-related constraints limit real freedoms (Keene & Blankenship, 2023; Woyo et al., 2025). Aid discourse and crisis guidance increasingly acknowledge gendered harms but rarely shift the structural conditions that shape lived experiences (Belingeri et al., 2021; Herten-Crabb et al., 2025; Vandeskog & Buts, 2025). Nonetheless, multisectoral health and housing programs in some U.S. cities have improved stability and personal autonomy for

low-income women, illustrating that substantive capability gains are achievable when interventions integrate multiple dimensions of well-being.

5.7. Synthesis

Across the five contexts, SDG 5 implementation is heavily mediated by local histories, governance structures, and socio-economic stratification. Although the findings reveal pervasive agenda–instrument gaps, they also show that progress emerges where reforms are locally grounded, adequately resourced, and designed in partnership with marginalized groups. The cases of Nepal, South Africa, Ghana, and the United States indicate that when implementation accounts for intersectionality, place, and structural barriers, gender equality initiatives become more responsive, and outcomes more equitable. These insights affirm the need for distribution-sensitive metrics and context-specific policy instruments that meaningfully align with the lived realities of marginalized women (Herten-Crabb et al., 2025; Vandeskog & Buts, 2025; Woyo et al., 2025).

To illustrate these comparative insights more clearly, Table 2 maps the SDG 5 targets against the corresponding country cases, observed implementation gaps, and the structural barriers identified through the analysis. This summary highlights how intersectional and context-specific inequalities continue to impede progress toward gender equality and demonstrates the persistence of the agenda–instrument gap across governance systems.

Table 2. SDG 5 Targets and Observed Gaps Across Contexts

SDG 5 Target	Country Example	Observed Gap	Underlying Structural Barrier
5.1: End all forms of discrimination	Nepal	Rural and Dalit women underrepresented in employment protections	Caste hierarchy + geographic exclusion
5.2: Eliminate violence against women and girls	India	Underreporting of caste and community linked gender-based violence	Social stigma + weak survivor protection systems + bias in law enforcement shaped by caste and community hierarchies
5.3: Eliminate harmful practices (e.g., child marriage)	Ghana	Child marriage rates persist in rural and northern regions	Poverty + customary marriage norms + limited enforcement
5.4: Recognize unpaid care and domestic work	Ghana	Women spend ~3x more unpaid labor hours than men	Lack of childcare infrastructure + informal labor expectations
5.5: Ensure women’s participation in leadership	South Africa	Gender quotas increase representation but largely among urban middle-class women	Elite capture of leadership pipelines
5.6: Ensure universal access to reproductive health & rights	United States	Restrictions and unequal access to reproductive healthcare for racialized and low-income women	Healthcare cost barriers + legal fragmentation + systemic racism
5.a: Equal rights to economic resources, property, inheritance	United States	African American women face disproportionately high housing and food insecurity	Structural racism in housing and labor markets

SDG 5 Target	Country Example	Observed Gap	Underlying Structural Barrier
5.b: Promote women’s access to enabling technologies	Nepal	Digital access remains lower for women in rural areas	Gendered digital literacy gaps + cost + infrastructure scarcity
5.c: Adopt gender-responsive policies and enforceable legislation	India	Policies recognize gender inequality but lack enforcement and financing	Agenda–instrument gap + bureaucratic fragmentation

6. Discussion

The analysis across five contexts demonstrates that SDG 5 implementation remains constrained by structural hierarchies that shape who benefits from gender equality reforms and who remains excluded. Rather than reflecting isolated programmatic shortcomings, these patterns reveal deeper mechanisms through which caste, race, class, disability, and place continue to organize access to labor markets, essential services, leadership pathways, and institutional protections. Intersectionality clarifies why Dalit, rural, and racialized women experience persistent underrepresentation in employment protections, food security initiatives, and housing access (Crenshaw, 1989; Koomson & Churchill, 2021; Dennard et al., 2022). Postcolonial critiques further illuminate how externally framed gender agendas, particularly in South Africa and other postcolonial contexts, can inadvertently silence local epistemologies and reduce community agency (Spivak, 1988; Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023). Even when reforms aim to expand participation, leadership frameworks frequently reproduce elite capture by privileging urban, middle-class women, reflecting hooks’ (2000) argument that formal inclusion alone cannot dismantle entrenched socio-economic inequality.

Across cases, the agenda–instrument gap remains visible, as gender rhetoric in aid discourse and multilateral crisis guidance intensifies without corresponding redistributive instruments or macro-structural reforms (Vandeskog & Buts, 2025; Herten-Crabb et al., 2025). This gap helps explain why recognition of unpaid care work, gender-based violence, or reproductive autonomy has not translated into transformative outcomes under Targets 5.4 to 5.6. Still, several localized initiatives, such as gender-responsive budgeting pilots in South Africa or streamlined benefit systems in some U.S. states, show that when reforms are designed with community input, tied to financing, and embedded within accountable institutions, measurable improvements are possible. These examples illustrate feasibility conditions that national policies often overlook, including locally anchored governance, sustained resources, and inclusive decision-making structures.

Critical Race Theory and disability scholarship further highlight how institutional racism and ableist infrastructures constrain substantive access to services, mobility, and economic opportunity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Woyo et al., 2025). These constraints reveal why aggregate SDG indicators routinely overstate progress, particularly in relation to place-based and disability-mediated inequalities. From a capabilities perspective, formal rights and representational metrics are insufficient, since meaningful gender equality requires improvements in autonomy, dignity, safety, and well-being (Nussbaum, 2006; Keene & Blankenship, 2023). The findings show that such outcomes remain unrealized for many women across India, Nepal, Ghana, South Africa, and the United States precisely because structural barriers remain intact.

Taken together, the evidence indicates that advancing SDG 5 requires reorienting implementation toward intersectional, decolonial, and justice-based frameworks that engage with local knowledge systems and confront the historical and institutional roots of exclusion.

Achieving durable progress depends on explicitly linking gender commitments to resource-backed mechanisms, data systems capable of capturing caste, race, disability, and place-based disparities, and governance arrangements that include marginalized groups as co-designers of reforms. These shifts, supported by feasible pathways evident in several country cases, offer a route for transforming SDG 5 from a predominantly rhetorical agenda into one capable of realizing substantive and equitable outcomes.

7. Conclusion

The analysis shows that progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) remains uneven and structurally constrained, particularly for women positioned at the intersections of caste, race, class, disability, and geography. Across the five contexts, formal commitments to gender equality continue to diverge from lived realities, as marginalized communities remain disproportionately excluded from labor markets, leadership opportunities, essential services, and political participation (Dahal et al., 2022; Koomson and Churchill, 2021; Rathee and Pareek, 2024). These patterns persist in part because post-2015 increases in gender-related rhetoric are not consistently matched by redistributive policy instruments (Vandeskog and Buts, 2025), crisis policy guidance often recognizes gendered harms without activating structural levers (Herten-Crabb et al., 2025), and capability constraints linked to disability and place continue to restrict substantive freedoms (Woyo et al., 2025). The findings reinforce Crenshaw's (1989) critique that single-axis gender policies fail to engage the complexities of intersecting identities and support Spivak's (1988) concern that global governance frameworks can marginalize subaltern voices. They also underscore the value of feminist, postcolonial, and Critical Race Theory perspectives in revealing how institutionalized racial, caste, and socio-economic hierarchies shape access to resources and opportunities (hooks, 2000, Nussbaum, 2006, Delgado and Stefancic, 2017).

Taken together, the study demonstrates that meaningful gender equality cannot be achieved through symbolic commitments or representational metrics alone. Advancing SDG 5 requires an intersectional, justice-oriented, and decolonial approach that links gender discourse to enforceable and well-resourced mechanisms and incorporates indicators attentive to disability and place (Herten-Crabb et al., 2025; Vandeskog and Buts, 2025; Woyo et al., 2025). Effective implementation must be grounded in participatory processes that center the priorities and knowledge systems of marginalized groups and guided by disaggregated data capable of capturing caste, race, disability, and place-based disparities. Evaluating progress on the basis of substantive outcomes such as dignity, autonomy, safety, and equitable access offers a more accurate reflection of lived experience than representational gains alone. Through such structural and epistemic shifts, SDG 5 can evolve from a largely rhetorical aspiration into a transformative framework that advances gender equality in practice.

8. Future Directions and Policy Implications

The pursuit of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) requires not only a diagnosis of implementation gaps but also a strategic program oriented toward equity, inclusion, and epistemic justice. The agenda below addresses methodological and thematic limitations, geographic blind spots, and structural reforms necessary to translate policy commitments into lived gains, drawing on recent critiques of crisis guidance, aid discourse, and disability-mediated outcomes.

8.1. Methodological Limitations and Research Gaps

Despite this study's multi-theoretical scope, exclusive reliance on secondary data constrains engagement with the situated experiences of structurally marginalized women, including Indigenous communities (Spivak, 1988; Dennard et al., 2022). Future research should adopt participatory and ethnographic methods, including feminist ethnography, narrative inquiry, and action research, to surface local epistemologies and decision-making logics (Chowdhury & Ahmad, 2023; UN Women, n.d.). This is especially urgent where crisis policy has recognized harms but not retooled instruments, and where aid discourse has intensified "gender" rhetoric without redistribution, amplifying the value of grounded inquiry (Herten-Crabb et al., 2025; Vandeskog & Buts, 2025).

8.2. Geographic and Thematic Expansion

The present focus on India, Nepal, Ghana, South Africa, and the United States, while illustrative, does not capture regional variation across Latin America, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and settler-colonial contexts (Crenshaw, 1989; Fanon, 1963). Comparative designs should interrogate intersections among gender, disability, migration, and climate displacement, attending to place-contingent capability constraints that remain underexamined (Nussbaum, 2006; Butler, 2004; Belingheri et al., 2021; Woyo et al., 2025).

8.3. Data, Policy, and Institutional Reform

Reform must begin with disaggregated, context-sensitive data architectures that reveal exclusions by caste, race, disability, and geography (UN Women, n.d.; Rosa & Clavero, 2022; Woyo et al., 2025). Policy co-design with affected communities should be institutionalized to counter top-down biases (Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023; Dahal et al., 2022). Organizations should embed intersectionality in training, equity audits, and accountability systems, while aligning crisis guidance and aid modalities with enforceable, resource-backed mechanisms to close the agenda-instrument gap (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Herten-Crabb et al., 2025; Vandeskog & Buts, 2025).

8.4. Transformative Metrics and Inclusive Leadership

Monitoring should privilege substantive outcomes over representational counts, assessing autonomy, labor equity, safety, housing, and health through a capabilities lens (Nussbaum, 2006; Keene & Blankenship, 2023). Governments should revalue and redistribute unpaid care, extend protections to informal labor, and require indicators sensitive to disability and place in SDG 5 reporting to prevent statistical overstatement of progress (Owoo & Lambon-Quayefio, 2021; Woyo et al., 2025). Leadership pipelines must be diversified to include women from subordinated caste, class, racial/ethnic, and rural constituencies, mitigating elite capture (hooks, 2000; Rosa & Clavero, 2022).

8.5. Epistemic Pluralism and Structural Accountability

Policies should engage Indigenous and decolonial knowledge systems to contest Eurocentric standard setting and to legitimate plural pathways to gender justice (Fanon, 1963; Rathee & Pareek, 2024). Independent equity audits, under community oversight, should evaluate both quantitative outcomes and qualitative experiences, with findings linked to corrective budgeting and regulatory enforcement (Tseng, 2012; Dennard et al., 2022; Chun et al., 2023; Koomson & Churchill, 2021). Finally, feminist and grassroots organizations require stable financing and formal roles in policy design and monitoring to ensure that heightened gender rhetoric is

tethered to actionable instruments (hooks, 2000; Belingheri et al., 2021; Herten-Crabb et al., 2025; Vandeskog & Buts, 2025). Only through such structurally accountable reforms, attentive to disability and place, can SDG 5 move from declarative ambition to durable, equitable outcomes (Woyo et al., 2025).

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