Localizing Sustainable Development Goals

The pursuit of Gender Equility in India and Maharashtra

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Acknowledgements:

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Abstract

The sustainable development goals (SDGs) offer an opportunity for subnational and national governments to take action for transformative change. This paper tracks India's promises and progress linked to SDG 5, which aims to achieve gender equality. With a focus on the need to localize SDGs in the state of Maharashtra, this paper explores government action to ensure gender-responsive and context-specific implementation of Agenda 2030. It delves into the key challenges experienced by women and gender minorities and addresses the role of civil society in centering unheard voices and strengthening accountability processes to leave no one behind.

1. Introduction

Sustainable Development Goals: An Opportunity for Transformative Impact

In 2015, when Agenda 2030 was introduced with its 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) and 169 impact-indicators, gender equality was prioritized as a crucial and cross-cutting issue. SDG 5 explicitly focused on achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls through the advancement of their social, economic and political rights. This led to a wider recognition of the need for gender-responsive development programmes at the global, national and local levels. With a view to address the gender-differentiated impact of SDGs, new tools for measuring progress and unconventional partnerships to 'leave no one behind' came to the forefront.

The SDG framework, spearheaded by countries from the Global South in consultation with grassroots leaders, civil society organizations, national governments, key representatives from the United Nations and several major stakeholders, reflected a disruptive approach to understanding the complex nature of global poverty. The SDGs, for the first time defined development as a universal agenda, and rejected the traditional division of countries into those who need to act and those called primarily to provide development assistance (Caballero, 2019). At its core, Agenda 2030 was characterized by a movement-based, justice-driven, and an arguably aspirational ethos. Unlike the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs), which were heavily critiqued for being reductionist, simplistic and indicative of a relatively narrow view of development (Sen, Mukherjee, 2013), the SDGs were guided by a rights-based approach that responded to the interconnected nature of global inequalities.

While Agenda 2030 has a robust framework with potential for transformative impact, its real success depends on the extent to which it is considered relevant and responsive to the context-specific vulnerabilities of people who grapple with structural oppression and marginalization. In lieu of the significant need to localize the global goals for the attainment of gender equality, this paper delves into the following questions:

- What does it mean to localize SDGs? Why does this matter?
- In terms of gender equality, what is the current scenario in India and Maharashtra?
- How can civil society strengthen bottom-up approaches to track and accelerate the impact of SDG 5 and Agenda 2030?

Through an exploration of government documents and secondary data that addresses the questions listed above and based on the regional consultation on the status of gender equality led by the Wada Na Todo Abhiyaan and the Human Rights Research and Advocacy Foundation, this paper aims to develop an understanding of the promises, progress and way forward for the advancement of SDG 5 in India, and more specifically, in Maharashtra.

2. Localizing SDGs in Maharashtra: What It Entails and Why It Matters and

'Leaving no one behind' lies at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This principle is mentioned at least seven times in the Agenda itself, and has been a recurrent theme in documents, pledges, calls to action, interventions and statements delivered since (Together 2030, 2019). In a nation where social structures, access to resources and normative discriminatory practices are guided by an individual's gender, caste, tribe, class, religion and various other identity-markers, the 2030 Agenda's inclusive, empowerment-focused approach to addressing inequality has the potential to ensure that India's strategic priorities center the needs of the most oppressed communities.

The promises of Agenda 2030, particularly SDG 5, highly align with Indian constitutional guarantees for women's fundamental rights, which are increasingly being violated within the present socio-political landscape. The Indian constitution prohibits gender-based discrimination and grants equality to women while also empowering the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women (MOSPI, 2020). India is also a signatory to several UN Conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 1948; Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 1979; International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action (ICPD-POA), 1994; The Beijing Platform for Action, 1995; and Convention on Rights of the Child (CRC), 1989 thus underscoring its commitment to gender equality (Jagori, 2020).

All of the SDGs have targets directly related to the responsibilities of local and regional governments (Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, UNDP, UN Habitat, 2019). If its vast scope to be adapted locally is leveraged effectively, the SDGs can provide an opportunity to restore the power of people's movements that currently face the risk of shrinking or being subverted by neoliberal development agendas.

Though the role of civil society in ensuring effective local governance and national progress is not clearly specified within the SDG framework, SDG 16 sets targets that highlight the significance of data-driven, people-centered monitoring and evaluation processes for development agendas. Given that this global commitment is, in fact, a tool for civil society groups and other UN member states to hold India accountable and build greater political willingness to deliver on promises of inclusion, coordinated efforts to localize SDGs are of utmost importance.

Although the success of localization efforts depends upon a complex multi-stakeholder model, the basic concept is rather straightforward. The Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, UNDP and UN Habitat defined it as follows:

"Localizing" is the process of taking into account subnational contexts in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, from the setting of goals and targets, to determining the means of implementation and using indicators to measure and monitor progress. Localization relates both to how the SDGs can provide a framework for local development policy and to how local and regional governments can support the

achievement of the SDGs through action from the bottom up and to how the SDGs can provide a framework for local development policy.

Accordingly, the government of India developed a national indicator framework and encouraged states to build state-level and district-level impact indicator frameworks to ensure that SDGs are integrated into local governments' programmatic, policy and research goals. The guidelines for the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) have also been revised, integrating the SDGs (Niti Aayog, 2020). In India, twenty-nine functions related to socio-economic development are devolved to local governments as identified in the sub-national laws (Niti Aayog, 2019). As a result, out of the 17 SDGs, 15 are directly related to activities carried out by local governments.

Maharashtra's key actions to prioritize SDGs and 'put people first' include:

- **Formalizing Institutional Mechanisms for Planning and Implementation:** The Planning Department was designated as the nodal department and the Directorate of Economics and Statistics as the nodal office for implementation of SDGs. There is increased collaboration with UN agencies to determine high, medium and low priority state-level schemes based on their linkages to the 2030 Agenda. The impact of the formal and informal processes emerging from such efforts to ensure that the government has the capacity and shared vision to deliver on SDGs is yet to be seen.

- **Creating Local Language Resources to Build Greater Awareness on SDGs:** Booklets on SDGs that list out the 17 Goals and 169 Targets have been translated to the State Official Language – 'Marathi' -- and have been shared widely with all departments of the government. Efforts to integrate knowledge of SDGs into school curriculums are also underway. While these approaches to building awareness on SDGs are critical, dialogues on the linkages between global goals and local realities need to be further mainstreamed, not only through written documents but also through audio-visual and social media that encourages greater participation from communities that are left behind.

- **Mapping Budget Allocations and Accountability Processes based on Maharashtra's Vision 2030 and Commitment to SDGs:** The District Annual Plan which has 138 district level schemes with an outlay of Rs. 9000 Crores in 2019 - 20 under the State General Plan, has been mapped to the 17 SDGs, 169 targets and 306 indicators identified by the Government of India. Further, the mapping of about 1595 State level schemes having budgetary outlay of Rs. 85022 Crores for 2019-20 is presently under progress (Niti Aayog, 2019). With a view to ensure an automatic and continuous linking of the outlays and outcomes from various Centrally Sponsored Schemes and State Level Schemes, the government has introduced a separate 'SDGs Tab' on the portal of the Maharashtra Plan Schemes-Information Management System to enable the Administrative Departments to enter the Information Data on 17 Goals and 169 targets. 0.1 percent of District-level funds (i.e. approximately 50 Crores for all 36 Districts) out of 0.5 percent of the total outlay available has been set aside for 'Monitoring, Evaluation and Data Entry' to enhance capacity-building processes.

Additionally, micro-plans for monitoring SDG progress in the 27 backward blocks across 13 districts have been introduced. The 'Action Room for Reduced Poverty' guides programme delivery efforts through key inputs on building efficiency and tracking effectiveness. Further it has been directed that all proposals under the Human Development Programme covering 125 Backward Blocks should be vetted against Maharashtra's SDGs Checklist prior to approval by the District Administration (Niti Aayog, 2019). However, budgetary performance evaluation systems and assessment tools for resource allocation and programmatic impact need to be strengthened. If not, it will be highly challenging to uphold transparency and keep track of unspent, underutilized or misused funds. To this effect, it is essential to explore the potential role of social audits in public programme evaluation processes.

- **Fostering Cross-Sectoral Partnerships:** The key to advancing SDGs is through collaboration, not competition. Though the national government aims to create an SDG-based incentivization programme for state governments to access grants, these funds remain limited. At this juncture, engagement with global partnerships as well as private-public partnerships that include diverse stakeholders is crucial given the rising need for investment in SDG localization efforts. Maharashtra has remained actively engaged in pioneering such collaborations. For example, the Village Social Transformation Foundation (VSTF) was introduced to promote Public-Private Partnership (PPP) between the State and Corporate Sectors and Philanthropic Organisations for the transformation of a thousand villages.

- **Prioritizing Gender-Responsive State Schemes and Policies:** The story of women's rights in Maharashtra becoming a focal point of state-supported schemes predates the launch of the 2030 Agenda. Maharashtra supports numerous welfare schemes for young girls and women as well as transgender individuals through the recent third gender welfare scheme introduced in 2019. These programmes address women's political participation, their social security and economic rights, their experiences of violence and lack of safety in private and public spaces, their right to nutrition, healthcare, education and several other cross-cutting targets of the SDGs. For example, the livelihood programme for rural women aims to make financial services accessible to 1,12,900 women, thereby directly contributing to SDG. 1, 5, 8 and 10 (Niti Aayog, 2019). Many ongoing schemes have their origins in empowerment processes led by women's movements whereas some others tend to tokenize women's needs and co-opt their decision-making agency. In an attempt to advance the SDGs, it is crucial to ensure that gender-responsive approaches are integrated into the design and implementation of state-led development schemes that are meant to address intersecting vulnerabilities. With a view to achieve this, the state must center the material realities of women, girls, transgender individuals and other sexual and gender minorities from the most oppressed communities to inform policies, practices and actionable change.

3. Gender Equality in India and Maharashtra: The Current Scenario

A mere glimpse into India's status on the advancement of the global goals, particularly the elimination of gender inequality, points to glaring gaps between policies and practices. According to the World Economic Forum, India had a low rank of 112 out of 153 countries that were assessed based on their gender parity score in the Global Gender Gap Index (Global Gender Gap Report, 2020). Despite being the first Indian state to establish a separate 'Women & Child Development' department, Maharashtra, India's second largest state in terms of population, has an SDG Index score of 36 out of 100 for its current status on the achievement of gender equality. As a result, Maharashtra has been categorized as a low-performing or 'aspirant' state.

Overall, India's score on its SDG Index improved from 57 to 60 (on a scale of 0 to 100) from 2018 to 2019 (Niti Aayog, 2020). This incremental progress, however, cannot be acknowledged without highlighting that the poverty and development indicators of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, religious minorities and other marginalised communities remain poor compared to national averages and development indicators for the dominant sections of the population (Wada Na Todo Abhiyaan, 2019). Despite few traces of relative progress, deeply entrenched structural inequalities continue to significantly impede the advancement of gender equality. India's 2020 VNR report stated that the nation is still far below the halfway mark (> 50/100) towards achieving SDG 5.

Furthermore, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic served to set India further behind on its progress related to SDG 5 by compounding pre-existing inequalities. Vulnerable sections among the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, de-notified tribes, nomadic Tribes, women, children, the elderly, transgender persons, and persons with disability were affected disproportionately (YUVA, 2021). State-led relief provisions that targeted marginalized women weren't designed to leave no one behind. In addition to completely excluding transgender persons and overlooking significant barriers of access to entitlements for women without ration cards, Aadhar cards or Jandhan bank accounts, the government's list of relief-recipients was based on an outdated 2011 census instead of a projected 2020 census. Thus, for instance, the PM JanDhan Yojana list for cash transfers would exclude poorer women (Jha, Sengupta, 2020) living on the margins. As highlighted in a study by YUVA on the challenges experienced by urban poor individuals during the pandemic, "a majority of the women faced several issues with their ration cards and were unable to access the full benefits they deserved resulting in frequent hunger during the lockdown. Some women were not even aware of welfare entitlements." Meanwhile, another study on the impact of the pandemic on single women farmers in rural Maharashtra highlighted that 33 percent of the women who were eligible for the PM Kisaan Sammaan scheme could not withdraw money even though cash transfers were deposited in their account as they could not reach the banks due to the lockdown. In some cases, bank correspondents came up to the villages to distribute the money, but women said that the agents charged a commission for the same (MAKAAM, 2020).

The following section highlights some of the key areas that call attention to widening gender inequities as India and particularly Maharashtra continue to work towards achieving SDG 5 and related targets while battling the impact of the COVID-19 crisis.

I.   Women's Work, Education and Nutrition

SDG 5.1	End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere
SDG 5.4	Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate
SDG 5.b.	Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women
SDG 5.c.	Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels

In a country where 81 percent of women are employed in the unorganised sector, involved in work that often denies them dignity of labour, social security, decent and timely wages and in some cases, even the right to be called a 'worker' (Banerjee, 2020), four in every ten working women lost their jobs, rendering more than 17 million women without jobs (Rukmini 2020) within the first two months of the pandemic-induced lockdown.

According to a study by OXFAM in 2020, gendered division of labour is one of the most resistant of norms and women's unpaid care work the site of least change. In addition to the loss of paid work and severe challenges of access to social security provisions due to lockdowns, the heightened burden of unpaid care work and household-level inequities further impacted women's physical and emotional well-being. With a gradual rise in demand for informal workers as lockdowns ease, women are forced to provide for care on the one hand and generate incomes to compensate for the losses incurred during the lockdown on the other. A large section of women in the unorganized sector who face this challenge include rural women - cultivators, wage labourers, the landless, and those engaged in poultry, livestock, forests, fisheries, etc. belonging to various socio-economic and religious groups (Kulkarni, 2021).

At the peak of the pandemic, remote schooling was only possible for young girls with access to high-speed internet connectivity and smart phones to learn via WhatsApp and other online applications. Without access to schools, ICDS centers and Aanganwadis, women and girls faced a severe setback in

their access to nutrition and health services, including a major decline in menstrual health and hygiene. The gendered nature of household work also restricted girls from being able to spend time on learning, thereby affecting their academic performance, and further widening the gender inequity in education (SAHAJ, 2020). Maharashtra's 2017 report on its 2030 Vision explained that even though the State had achieved nearly 98 percent enrolment in schools at primary level, the gender gap in enrolment was 5.75 percent. Thus, an already grave challenge was aggravated due to the unequal impact of the pandemic.

II.   Domestic Violence, Sexual Harassment and Public Safety

SDG 5.2.	Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including tracking and sexual and other types of exploitation
SDG 5 c.	Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels

As per the National Family Health Survey 2015-16, one in three ever-married women aged between 15 to 49 years experience a physical, sexual, or emotional form of spousal violence (Niti Aayog, 2019). In the wake of the nationwide lockdown, the number of domestic violence complaints received by the National Commission for Women (NCW) had doubled (EPW, 2020), contributing significantly to the worldwide 'shadow pandemic'. Between the beginning of March to 5 April 2020, the NCW received 310 grievances of domestic violence and 885 complaints for other forms of violence against women, many of which were domestic in nature, such as bigamy, polygamy, dowry deaths, and harassment for dowry (Sen, 2020). Furthermore in Maharashtra, between April and September, the Women and Child Development Department's helpline (181) received 26,164, calls of which 6,590 were reporting domestic violence. Experts say this is just a fraction of the actual situation as an estimated 86 percent of women who experience intimate partner violence do not report it or seek help, according to the National Family Health Survey (Chakrobarty, 2020).

The Domestic Violence Act and related laws, however, are not uniformly enforced to safeguard the entitlements of all women. Muslim women remain particularly disadvantaged in this realm, where they are often denied support from the police and experience their own religion and complex histories of pre-colonial laws being pitted against them. When they speak up about their experiences of gender-based discrimination in an attempt to emancipate themselves, Muslim women often grapple with the fear that the state is co-opting their struggle to preserve the status quo of rising Islamophobia and criminalization of Muslim men.

The government of India has come up with several schemes, laws and guidelines to address high rates of rape and sexual violence. However, several of these schemes are not implemented effectively. The Nirbhaya Fund for compensation of rape survivors, one stop centres and domestic violence protection is mostly left unutilised (Jagori, 2020). A recent report by SAHAJ on progress linked to SDG 5 in India illustrates this challenge through a key example: "The Supreme Court of India has mandated between Rs

5 to 10 lakhs as minimum compensation for rape victims. With 6.3 registered rape cases per lakh female population (2016) and at the rate of Rs. 10 lakhs per registered case, the Nirbhaya Fund would require at least Rs 8355 crores just for compensation. However in reality only Rs 3500 crores have been allocated (2018), which remain largely unutilised."

Sexual harassment is commonly seen as a rite of passage for young men and a minor aberration of masculinity, if at all (OXFAM, 2020). Despite ample evidence of what these gendered behaviors mean for women's everyday experiences, the government failed to properly implement the 2013 Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Law, that mandates the creation and proper functioning of complaint committees for women in the informal sector. This lack of prioritization of mechanisms to ensure women's safety has further invisibilized the barriers faced by women at work.

Lack of safety for women in public spaces remains a widespread concern. According to a 2016 survey by Action Aid, 84 percent of women in the age group of 25-35 years experienced sexual harassment. 82 percent of them were full time workers and 68% were students. However, in 2015, out of total children trafficked, 90.29 percent were girl children whereas in 2018 this proportion significantly reduced to 44 percent (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2020).

III.   Reproductive, Sexual and Maternal Health

SDG 5.6	Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences
SDG 3.1.	By 2030, reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births

Maharashtra has made significant progress towards reducing its Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR). With a 6.15 percent decline from 130 in 2014-16 to 122 in 2015-17, India is on track to achieve the global goal of a MMR of less than 70 deaths per 100,000 births by 2030 (Niti Aayog, 2020).

However, women are facing key challenges linked to their reproductive and sexual health especially during the pandemic. As explained in a recent report by SAHAJ, India, "Reproductive health services have been severely impacted by the COVID-19 lockdown, resulting in unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions and maternal deaths. Estimates by FRHS India indicate that between 24.55 to 27.18 million couples have not been able to access contraception during the lockdown period, resulting in between 1.94 million to 2.95 million unintended pregnancies, around 1.44 million abortions of which around 834,042 could be unsafe abortions. India was already lagging on this SDG target."

Women working in the sugarcane industry in Maharashtra also increasingly are pushed to undertake hysterectomies to prevent days off work due to periods, and to forgo the recurring costs of sanitary napkins. Between 2016 and 2019, more than 4,500 young women in Beed, Maharashtra have undergone a hysterectomy due to this reason (Business Standard, 2020). Thus, the gendered impact of poor public health mechanisms in Maharashtra is monumental. Emphasising the achievements linked to reducing maternal mortality without recognizing other health challenges posed to women and gender minorities will only serve to further disadvantage communities that are left behind.

IV.   Land Rights and Rural Distress

SDG 5.a.	Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws

In India, women's land rights have remained an area where patriarchal traditions create major roadblocks for women to enjoy equal property rights. The Hindu Succession Act (2005) as well as the National Women's Policy (2020) recognize women's land rights in alignment with SDG 5.a.1. However, even though women farmers constitute over 42 percent of the agricultural labour force in India, they own less than two percent of farmland (NCAER, 2018). 81 percent of women farmers are also Dalit and Adivasi while only 8 percent of them have control over their agricultural income. Furthermore, 61 percent of Dalit women who own land don't have more than two hectares. This points to the intersecting vulnerabilities experienced by Dalit and Tribal women in rural India who suffer from the denial of land rights as well as the everyday experiences of surviving without caste and gender privilege.

A 2018 survey conducted by the Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch of 505 women farmers (whose husbands died by suicide due to the farmer crisis) in 11 districts across Marathwada and Vidarbha, found that 40 percent of women widowed by farmer suicides between 2012 and 2018, were yet to obtain rights of the farmland they cultivated (Pachauri, 2019). Female farmer suicides are highly underestimated because their names are often not listed on the land titles. The invisibilization of women's work in agriculture creates key challenges for their awareness and access to rights and entitlements. As they are not categorized as 'farmers' in official records, they struggle to access institutional credit, pension, irrigation sources, etc. Since 2013, over 12,000 farmers have died by suicide every year and the burden of debt repayment has fallen on the wives who often have no assets and have to work full time as farmers to pay back debts (Anureet, 2020).

The gendered impact of rural distress plays a huge role in leaving women behind. Rural distress has several manifestations including but not limited to rising numbers of suicides, pervasive under-nutrition among women and children, growing disease burden and rising healthcare costs (NRAS, 2020). Despite growing challenges due to decades of exacerbation of the agrarian crisis and the pandemic, the government passed three farm bills aimed at increased privatization of the agricultural sector that further added to rural women's economic vulnerabilities.

V.   Political Participation

SDG 5.5.	Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life

Prior to the pandemic, the 2020 Voluntary National Review (VNR) report stated that political participation of women is a key area where there has been commendable progress in the recent past (Niti Aayog, 2020). Women's increased access to their political rights can also be traced back to India's 73rd Constitutional Amendment Acts passed in 1992, which ensured one-third of the total seats for women in all elected offices in local governance bodies whether in rural areas or urban areas. In Maharashtra, women in Panchayati Raj Institutions have experienced greater access to decision making through participation in local governance. However, there are also instances of women's political presence serving as a proxy for men to exercise their own demands and defy the personal and political agency of elected women. Currently, the SDG indicators for political participation remain focused on the "number" of seats held by women in national parliaments, local governments as well as in managerial roles. Though these are relevant indicators, exploring additional ways to track empowerment processes linked to political participation is essential.

An underexplored area of women's political participation involves their role in protests. Especially in the context of India, it is crucial to delve into women's contribution to protests as a means to map their involvement in public life as well as their scope to hold governments accountable for the achievement of SDGs. In 2020, marginalized women's contribution to political life was best demonstrated through their leadership in protests against discriminatory and oppressive laws. Young Muslim women living in informal settlements led community organizing efforts to register their protest against India's direct violation of minority rights on account of the central government's introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Act and National Registry of Citizens. More recently, women's farmer organizations have been at the forefront of protests to address the potentially devastating impact of the farm bills in Maharashtra.

4. Civil Society and Community-Led Action: The Key to Leaving No One Behind

In the 2019 Voluntary National Review presented at the UN High Level Political Forum, Niti Aayog proposed integrating civil society perspectives into its agenda to leave no one behind. In every possible way, this is an opportunity for civil society organizations (CSOs) to act as agents of accountability. In Maharashtra, many women-led movements have paved the way for greater state-action and overall progress. From pioneering campaigns for women's right to education, organizing women for greater economic independence through self-help groups, sharing responsibilities with the government to ensure access to basic services and support for survivors of domestic violence, the power of civil society to center unheard voices and shape the strategic interests of the government is immense. By being aware of and linking with the objectives of the SDGs, CSOs can take a cross-cutting approach to identifying creative solutions on the ground – solutions that government departments, which tend to operate in silos, may miss (ACSC, 2016).

The state and central government's role for the advancement of SDGs at the local level focuses on awareness-raising, advocacy, implementation and monitoring. The following section discusses critical approaches for civil society to strengthen the government's localization efforts for the advancement of SDG 5 and Agenda 2030.

> ❖ **Call attention to systemic acts of exclusion**

Despite its earnest promise of inclusion, the SDG framework has severe limitations when analyzed through a perspective of LGBTQ rights. Even though the 'leave no one behind' principle highly resonates with the needs of gender and sexual minorities in India, SDG 5, which focuses on gender equality, limits itself to the empowerment of 'women and girls', thereby excluding a key population that is already erased or shunned due to rigid legacies of gendered norms and expectations.

SDG localization efforts are meant to be bottom-up in nature. With this in mind, civil society can play a huge role in identifying new pathways to center the rights of LGBTQ people as part of the overall commitment towards Agenda 2030. In India, civil society's potential to raise the issues of the LGBTQ community came to the forefront in the movement to abolish Section 377 which criminalized same-sex relations. In July 2020, the government published a draft Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Rules, seeking comments from civil society. But rights groups called on the authorities to halt the process of finalizing rules for a law, passed last year, which failed to provide full protection and recognition to transgender people (HRW, 2021). This law, the Transgender Person (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, compelled transgender persons to go through a sex reassignment surgery, violating their right to self-

identification. Such discriminatory laws need to be carefully evaluated and continuously challenged by civil society organizations until freedom and justice for all prevails.

As discussed in previous sections, Muslim women, Dalit and Tribal women face multiple vulnerabilities due to poor enforcement of laws that can safeguard their rights. Thus, women from oppressed communities face a heightened denial of necessary resources and entitlements. It is crucial for civil society to create platforms that aim to learn about such struggles and demands. Furthermore, bringing these narratives into dialogues on poverty and inequality is the only way to ensure that governments prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable women.

❖ <u>Cultivate a gender-lens towards data collection, budgeting and capacity-building</u>

The collection of gender-disaggregated data is the key to ensuring that the complexities of poverty are understood without repeating age-old patterns of exclusion. For example, studying 'marginalized women' without emphasizing the distinct differences in the experiences of denotified tribal women as compared to Hindu women living in urban poor communities further emboldens programs and policies that do not serve heterogeneous needs. Given the rampant inequalities that continue to grow in India, it is vital to ensure that women's varied experiences are captured to inform processes that address their lived realities. The knowledge gathered through gender-disaggregated data can guide civil society's strategic advocacy priorities. Qualitative data that immersively engages with lived experiences with a view to assess the effectiveness of public programs can go a long way in ensuring government action in the right direction. Similarly, gender-responsive budgeting for programs is a crucial priority within CSOs. Civil society can also raise questions to ensure gender-sensitive budgeting across different departments of local government. By taking a deeper look at existing state and district level impact indicators, CSOs can identify ways to measure grassroots progress that can allow for comparative analysis at the subnational, national and global level while also remaining uniquely reflective of women's diverse challenges. With a view to achieve these goals, gender-responsive budgeting that aligns with state-giving priorities is essential. Additionally, investing in capacity-building of community organizers, researchers, and programme planning personnel is a prerequisite to ensuring that the linkages between SDGs and gendered realities are widely understood.

❖ <u>Collaborate with local governments, community-based groups and marginalized communities</u>

Civil society has the responsibility of communicating the needs of the most oppressed people to those who have the power and privilege to create transformative change. Working with local governments is a central aspect of the role of civil society. In Maharashtra, the Women and Child Development department has entered several partnerships with NGOs and community-based organizations. However, instead of remaining restricted to the role of an implementing agency, civil society faces the challenge and goal of effectively highlighting the structural violence that disproportionately impacts women and gender minorities' everyday lives. Despite new forms of government-supported efforts to curb the movement-driven spirit of civil society such as the introduction of the 2020 Foreign Contribution Regulation Act

which heavily restricts foreign funding for Indian NGOs, an intentional focus on building strategic partnerships with the state that leverage the varied strengths of key stakeholders remains the need of the hour. Furthermore, the rising challenges of retaining a rights-based approach to advancing the SDGs must be brought to the forefront at national, subnational and global coalitions that aim to chart out a shared vision for civil society action.

Civil society also plays a significant role in ensuring that governments reach their constituents and support the advancement of participatory democracy. At this juncture, it is important to prioritize efforts to strengthen pre-existing partnerships with other community-based groups, people's unions and marginalized individuals to share resources, information and awareness of SDGs. As seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, such partnerships play a major role in enabling people's access to their fundamental rights.

❖ Create people-centered systems of accountability

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 mandates 5 percent reservation in the allotment of agricultural land, and housing in all relevant schemes and development programmes, poverty alleviation schemes for people with disabilities with a priority for women with disabilities, the work on which is yet not done by the state governments (Jagori, 2019). This is one of many examples where the state didn't deliver on its commitment to the SDGs. Civil society organizations are uniquely positioned to question why and how people were left behind on the path to progress. They can organize advocacy initiatives and work with the media as well as governments to ensure that local authorities are publicly held responsible for delivering on their commitments. Additionally, by building awareness on the ground, creating opportunities for constituents to directly meet and speak with their local representatives about progress on SDGs and by initiating independent monitoring and evaluation processes for public programmes, civil society can continue fulfilling its role as an agent of accountability while also restoring people's power.

5. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the government's efforts to localize SDGs, key challenges faced by women, girls and other gender minorities, as well as the role of civil society in remaining gender-responsive and shaping the way forward while Maharashtra continues to work towards the achievement of Vision 2030. First, it answers critical questions that lead to an understanding that the SDGs have the scope to work for the interests of the most marginalized. Second, it draws linkages between global goals and local challenges shaped by growing gender inequities in India and Maharashtra, pointing to the fact that at the current rate of progress towards localizing SDG 5, delivering on Agenda 2030 will be impossible. Finally, it addresses how civil society can collaborate with the government and strengthen accountability processes to ensure that the transformative capacity of the SDGs is unleashed.

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