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CONTENT LIST

GS 2: POLITY, GOVERNANCE, SOCIAL JUSTICE, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS/INSTITUTIONS

	Topics	Syllabus	Page No:
1	Inclusion in public spaces — from fear to freedom	Social justice (TH)	6
2	An equitable future for women in science, in India	Social justice (TH)	6

GS 3: ECONOMY, ECOLOGY, SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY, DEFENCE, SECURITY AND DISASTER MANAGEMENT

	Topics	Syllabus	Page No:
3	A New Rule Book	Environment & ecology (IE)	8
4	Climate change	Environment & ecology (AT)	6

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1. Inclusion in public spaces — from fear to freedom

Context: India is often considered to be one of the most unsafe countries for women, a reality that demands urgent and deliberate change. India was ranked 128 among 177 countries rated in Women, Peace and Security Index 2023. While deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that lead to violence cannot be dismantled overnight, meaningful progress can be made by challenging the everyday barriers that women face. On International Women’s Day today, it is crucial to reflect on a fundamental but an often-ignored issue — the accessibility of public spaces for women.

Key points

- **Overview:** Public spaces, which are arenas where socio-economic life thrives, need to be reshaped where women feel safe and welcome.
- **Gendered spatial control:** *Importance of Public Spaces* - Public spaces serve as arenas where socio-economic life thrives and evolves.
Impacts on Women’s Mobilities - Public spaces are gendered and political, confining most women to the private and domestic sphere.
Women’s Engagement with Public Spaces - For working women, public spaces serve primarily as transitional zones for commuting.
Reclaiming Public Spaces - A space is truly safe and inclusive when women can navigate it freely and without hesitation.
- **Issue of safety:** *Women’s safety as a pressing concern* - Violence against women is not confined to public spaces.
Curated spaces vs. open spaces - Women are largely found in curated spaces such as malls, theatres, and cafes, where the likelihood of violence is perceived to be lower.
Everyday spaces and gendered access - Everyday public spaces — those that men navigate freely — continue to be unwelcoming to women.
Community role and government role - It is here that the community and the government can be great enablers.
- **Policy level changes:** *Policy level and government role* - The government can drive change by reimagining public space planning and design.
Public safety and legal enforcement - Another critical area requiring government intervention is strengthening public safety.
Victim blaming and societal attitudes - Even today, women are often blamed for being in the “wrong place at the wrong time”.
Gendered fear and patriarchal control - This not only fosters a culture of impunity but also reinforces a gendered fear.
- **Conclusion:** So, by consciously reshaping public spaces, we can create environments where women feel safe and truly welcome. While centuries of patriarchy cannot be dismantled overnight, meaningful change begins with small, everyday actions. From the built environment of public space to societal attitudes, every shift, no matter how gradual, brings us closer to an inclusive society where women can navigate and own public spaces freely, without fear or restriction.

2. An equitable future for women in science, in India

Context: Women in science navigate a minefield of challenges that often start early. Educational barriers, such as limited access to quality schools and gendered societal norms, can discourage girls from pursuing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). For those who persist and are fortunate to get past these early hurdles, cultural expectations frequently demand that they prioritise family over careers, severely jeopardising professional growth. Gender stereotypes further restrict opportunities, affecting hiring, promotions and funding. Harassment and discrimination in academic settings add another dimension of hostility that push many women out of the field.

Key points

- **Overview:** With India continuing to push the boundaries of scientific and technological advancement, it must ensure the full inclusion of women in this journey.
- **Global patterns and India's trends:** A study of STEM scientists across 38 countries reveals higher attrition rates for women.
- **Key barriers and career challenges:** Familial responsibilities, low confidence, and lack of female role models are key factors.
- **Historical struggles and recognition issues:** The "Matilda Effect" describes the tendency to downplay women's scientific contributions.
- **Persistent gender inequity in STEM fields:** Nearly 200 years later, gender inequity in STEM persists.
- **Structural barriers and systemic inequities:** A more recent "Chutes and Ladders" model highlights broader barriers.
- **A survey across India:** *India's context and conservative attitudes* - Examining these concepts is particularly valuable in India. Where conservative attitudes abound, and gender disparities persist.
Survey findings and faculty representation - An extensive survey across 98 institutions conducted in 2020-21. Found that women faculty members across all fields were a mere 17%. Ranging from 23% in biology to 8% in engineering.
Key recommendations to improve retention - First, institutional changes such as flexible work options and affordable childcare. Second, public recognition of both triumphs and obstacles is crucial. Finally, a nuanced approach across career stages is crucial.
- **Interventions:** *Government initiatives and gender equity* - The Indian government has taken significant steps to advance gender equity in STEM. The Department of Science and Technology (DST) launched the Gender Advancement for Transforming Institutions (GATI) pilot in 2020.
Key programmes and support initiatives - GATI aims to foster an inclusive environment for women and gender-diverse individuals in STEM.
Biotechnology sector and career re-entry - Noteworthy efforts include the Department of Biotechnology's BioCARE programme.
Medical research and women's training - The Indian Council of Medical Research spearheads several programmes.
- **Conclusion:** As India continues to push the boundaries of scientific and technological advancement, the full inclusion of women in this journey is not only a matter of fairness but also an example of true progress that can set a powerful example for the world to emulate.

3. A New Rule Book

Context: The adoption of the Paris Climate Pact, 10 years ago, instilled hope that the global community had found the resolve to tackle one of the most difficult challenges before it. It spurred countries to draft national plans to combat global warming and paved the way for a 'rule book' for climate action. The transition to green energy remains fraught, with the developed world, emerging economies and the least developed countries not being on the same page on eliminating fossil fuel use. Brazil's minister for climate action, Marina Silva has suggested setting up "additional multilateral mechanisms complementary to the Paris Agreement framework" to ensure that countries adhere to national commitments.

Key points

- **Overview:** National commitments today are nowhere close to meeting the pact's goal of limiting temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. The transition to green energy remains fraught, with the developed world, emerging economies and the least developed countries not being on the same page on eliminating fossil fuel use.
- **Institutional Limitations of the UNFCCC:** *Implementation Gaps* - Over 30 subsidiary agencies address funding, adaptation, and loss/damage, yet fail to enforce compliance. Temperature thresholds continue to be breached.
Weak Enforcement - No mechanisms to hold nations accountable for unmet commitments.
- **Structural Flaws in the Paris Framework:** *Inadequate Review Cycles* - 5-year review intervals for national goals deemed insufficient (as highlighted by Brazil's Marina Silva).
Exclusive Focus on Treaties - Prioritizes negotiations over actionable implementation support.
- **Proposed Reforms:** *Strengthening the UNFCCC* - Leverage the IPCC's scientific credibility for climate diplomacy and policy influence. Shift focus to tracking progress and enforcing accountability.
Complementary Multilateral Mechanisms - Create additional mechanisms to ensure adherence to national commitments. Foster partnerships between neighbouring countries, civil society, and businesses to bypass bureaucratic inertia.
Addressing Equity Gaps - Resolve disparities in fossil fuel elimination timelines between developed and developing nations. Prioritize support for vulnerable economies to transition sustainably.
- **Way ahead:** *Shorten Review Cycles* - Accelerate revisions of national climate goals to reflect real-time progress.
Inclusive Governance - Integrate non-state actors (e.g. IPCC, NGOs) into decision-making.
Regional Collaboration - Build alliances to address localized climate impacts and shared resources.
Enforcement Mechanisms - Develop penalties or incentives to ensure compliance with pledges.
- **Conclusion:** Climate negotiation is too serious an issue to be left solely to one UN agency. It requires building alliances at regional levels i.e. between neighbouring countries, among civil society groups and business organisations. Brazil's climate action minister's suggestion could be seen as a precursor to a different and effective climate change diplomacy.

4. Climate change

Context: Assam Technology Minister Keshab Mahanta's assertion in the ongoing Assembly session about taking effective steps for climate change mitigation does not sound convincing as the effects of climate change are already palpable, especially regarding changing weather patterns and extreme weather events that are hitting the State with increasing frequency. The situation calls for pragmatic planning and swift execution, more so because Assam has 15 districts among the 25 across the country identified as most vulnerable to climate change.

Key points

- **Increased Flooding and River Erosion in Assam:** Assam, with the Brahmaputra River, faces severe annual flooding, impacting over 31% of the state's area. Climate change has intensified monsoon variability and increased glacier melt in the Himalayas, contributing to higher river flows and more severe floods.
- **Erratic Monsoons and Droughts:** Assam, heavily reliant on rain-fed agriculture, is highly sensitive to monsoon fluctuations. Climate change causes erratic rainfall patterns, resulting in periods of drought, which reduces water availability for crops and contributes to food insecurity.
- **Increased Frequency of Extreme Weather Events:** Assam has been experiencing more frequent extreme weather events such as severe storms and flash floods. Climate models indicate that rising global temperatures will continue to drive such extremes, increasing the intensity and unpredictability of disasters in the region.
- **Impact on Ecosystems and Livelihoods:** Climate change-induced disasters not only destroy infrastructure but also disrupt ecosystems. In Assam, floods and changing climate patterns threaten biodiversity in critical areas like Kaziranga National Park, where increased floods endanger both wildlife and local communities dependent on eco-tourism.
- **Urban Flooding and Infrastructure Strain:** Urban areas like Guwahati face growing risks of urban flooding, exacerbated by poor drainage and unplanned urbanization. The combination of climate change and rapid urban expansion has led to increased waterlogging, with IPCC reports indicating that climate-driven extreme precipitation events are only expected to worsen this problem in Assam's cities.
- **Way ahead: Adaptation and Resilience** - The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the UNFCCC Paris Agreement both stress the importance of integrating climate adaptation into disaster management frameworks. Assam must strengthen its flood management systems, invest in climate-resilient infrastructure, and improve riverbank protection measures. Afforestation and wetland restoration projects can also reduce the impacts of climate change on flooding and erosion in Assam's floodplains.

Early Warning Systems and Community Preparedness - As suggested in PM Modi's 10-Point Agenda, improving early warning systems for climate-related disasters is critical. Assam needs to adopt technology-based solutions such as satellite monitoring (already used by ISRO) to track changing weather patterns and issue timely warnings.