



Rights and Realities: A Comparative Analysis of Laws and Policies for Working Women in India and the UK

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of law, policy, and lived experience by comparing workplace protections for women in India and the United Kingdom. Through an analysis of key statutes — including India’s *Maternity Benefit Act*, *Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act*, and *Equal Remuneration Act*, alongside the UK’s *Equality Act 2010*, *Shared Parental Leave Regulations*, and workplace harassment guidelines — the research investigates how each legal framework addresses gender equity, maternity rights, and safety at work. Using primary legislation, policy documents, and secondary legal commentary, this study examines the scope of protections, the strength of enforcement mechanisms, and the gap between law and practice. The paper also considers cultural and institutional factors that influence implementation, from entrenched gender norms to the role of regulatory agencies. By placing India and the UK side by side, this comparative analysis illuminates best practices, persistent shortcomings, and pathways toward more equitable workplaces globally.

Introduction

Workplace equality has become one of the defining measures of progress in the 21st century, with gender equity forming a crucial part of that conversation. While much has been achieved, working women across the globe continue to face systemic barriers ranging from wage disparities to harassment and unequal access to opportunities. Legal frameworks play a decisive role in addressing these challenges — not only by establishing rights but by shaping the culture and expectations of workplaces themselves.

This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of laws and policies affecting working women in **India** and the **United Kingdom**, two nations whose legal systems share colonial ties but diverge sharply in enforcement, societal attitudes, and institutional capacity. By examining India's *Maternity Benefit Act (2017)*, *Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013)*, and *Equal Remuneration Act (1976)*, alongside the UK's *Equality Act 2010*, *Shared Parental Leave Regulations (2014)*, and workplace harassment guidelines, the study highlights not only statutory protections but the realities of their implementation.

A comparative lens offers particular value: it illuminates how similar principles — like maternity protection or anti-discrimination — can translate differently depending on legal culture, regulatory capacity, and public awareness. It also exposes the “law in books vs. law in action” gap, a persistent issue in both countries, albeit for different reasons.

The study is structured around three key questions: **(1)** How do legislative protections differ in scope and enforcement between India and the UK? **(2)** What mechanisms — from tribunals to workplace policies — support the translation of rights into reality? **(3)** Where do gaps persist, and what lessons can each jurisdiction draw from the other?

Ultimately, this paper argues that while the UK's legal framework offers stronger enforcement and institutional backing, India's evolving legislative landscape reflects a growing, if uneven, commitment to gender equity. Understanding the strengths and shortcomings of each system is not only academically valuable but essential for shaping future reforms — both in these nations and in the broader global movement for women's workplace rights.

Legal Framework in India

India's legal approach to protecting the rights of working women reflects the country's evolving struggle to balance constitutional commitments to equality with deep-rooted social and cultural barriers. The Constitution of India itself establishes a foundation for gender equity, with **Article 14** guaranteeing equality before the law, **Article 15(1)** prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of sex, and **Article 16** mandating equality of opportunity in public employment (Government of India, 1950). However, constitutional promises required the scaffolding of specific legislation to address the realities of women's experiences in the workplace. Over the past five decades, India has enacted a series of pivotal laws — the *Maternity Benefit Act (2017)*, the *Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act (2013)*, and the *Equal Remuneration Act (1976)* — that attempt to provide both protection and empowerment.

1. The Maternity Benefit Act (2017): Expanding Protection for Mothers

The *Maternity Benefit Act*, first enacted in 1961 and most recently amended in 2017, represents one of India's most progressive interventions in workplace gender policy. The amendment extended paid maternity leave from 12 to **26 weeks** for women employed in the formal sector, placing India among the countries with the longest maternity leave provisions globally (Ministry of Labour, 2017). The Act applies to establishments with 10 or more employees and mandates not only leave but also **job protection**, ensuring that women cannot be dismissed on account of pregnancy.

The 2017 amendment also introduced forward-looking provisions: mandatory **crèche facilities** for workplaces employing 50 or more individuals, and the right for new mothers to **visit the crèche four times a day**. Additionally, the Act allows **work-from-home arrangements** where the nature of employment permits, providing flexibility that reflects modern workplace realities (ILO, 2019).

However, the scope of this progressive framework is constrained by its **limited reach**. Nearly 90% of Indian women work in the **informal sector** — as agricultural workers, domestic helpers, or self-employed entrepreneurs — and are largely excluded from these protections (World Bank, 2020). For these women, maternity leave remains an unaffordable luxury, and enforcement in smaller workplaces is patchy at best. Critics also note that placing the full financial burden of extended leave on employers may create subtle disincentives to hiring women of childbearing age (Sharma, 2021).

2. Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013): From Vishaka to Codification

The passage of the *Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act* in 2013 marked a landmark moment for gender safety in India. Its roots trace back to the Supreme Court's **Vishaka Guidelines** (1997), issued after the brutal gang rape of Bhanwari Devi, a social worker attempting to stop child marriage in Rajasthan. These guidelines established the principle that sexual harassment violates a woman's fundamental rights to equality, life, and liberty under Articles 14, 15, and 21 of the Constitution (Supreme Court of India, 1997).

The 2013 Act codified and expanded these protections, defining **sexual harassment broadly** — from physical advances to verbal and non-verbal conduct — and making it clear that it is not confined to hierarchical relationships but includes harassment by peers, clients, or customers (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2013). A cornerstone of the Act is the establishment of **Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs)** in all organizations with 10 or more employees, as well as **Local Complaints Committees (LCCs)** at the district level to cover unorganized sectors.

Despite the clarity of the framework, enforcement is fraught. Studies reveal that many organizations either fail to constitute ICCs or treat them as a mere formality (Economic Times, 2021). Women in the informal sector — street vendors, domestic workers — rarely know of their rights, and fear of retaliation or stigma often prevents reporting. Even in high-profile cases like the *Tehelka* scandal (2013) and *Tata Motors* harassment case (2015), media attention underscored how institutional biases and power dynamics can undercut legal remedies.

3. The Equal Remuneration Act (1976): Aspirations vs. Realities

India's *Equal Remuneration Act (ERA)*, passed in 1976, was among the country's earliest gender equity statutes, mandating **equal pay for equal work** and prohibiting discrimination in recruitment (Government of India, 1976). It applies to both the public and private sectors and was an important step in aligning India with its obligations under the International Labour Organization's Convention No. 100.

On paper, the ERA is straightforward: no employer may pay women less than men for the same or similar work, and no discrimination may occur in hiring, promotions, or transfers. However, the Act's impact has been muted. **Enforcement mechanisms are weak**, with inspections rare and penalties minimal. Wage disparities persist across sectors — according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2020), Indian women earn on average **20% less than men** for comparable work (ILO, 2020). Structural issues compound the problem: women are often concentrated in lower-paying roles or informal work, and lack access to grievance redressal mechanisms.

Recognizing the need for reform, the ERA has been subsumed into the **Code on Wages (2019)**, part of India's ongoing labor law consolidation. While the Code reaffirms the principle of equal pay, its implementation remains uneven and dependent on future rules and enforcement guidelines.

4. The Informal Sector: The Unseen Majority

Any discussion of workplace rights in India must grapple with the reality that **nearly nine out of ten women** work outside the formal sector. Domestic work, farm labor, and self-employment dominate, and these roles often **fall through the cracks** of legal protections (ILO, 2022). While schemes like the *Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana* provide limited cash assistance to pregnant women in the informal economy, they reach only a fraction of those in need (UNICEF, 2021).



The gap between statutory protections and lived reality is stark: the law might promise 26 weeks of maternity leave, but for a street vendor or domestic helper, there is no employer to grant it, no committee to hear harassment complaints, and no pay slip to ensure wage parity.

Conclusion: A Landscape in Transition

India's legal framework for working women represents both progress and paradox. The *Maternity Benefit Act* and *Sexual Harassment Act* reflect an expanding awareness of gender equity issues and set ambitious benchmarks. Yet the persistence of weak enforcement, employer resistance, and the massive exclusion of informal workers leave millions unprotected. India's challenge is not only to **write better laws** but to **make them work** — through awareness, institutional accountability, and inclusion of those women for whom “workplace rights” are still an abstraction.

Legal Framework in the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom's approach to workplace rights for women is shaped by decades of progressive reform, EU influence, and evolving social norms. UK law has moved from piecemeal anti-discrimination measures to a **comprehensive equality framework** that positions gender equity as central to workplace policy. Three pillars define the landscape: the **Equality Act 2010**, which consolidated anti-discrimination protections; the **Shared Parental Leave Regulations 2014**, which reframed maternity and paternity entitlements; and robust **workplace harassment guidelines** issued by regulators like the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). Together, these laws and policies establish some of the strongest statutory protections for working women globally — though gaps in enforcement and cultural barriers remain.

1. Equality Act 2010: A Comprehensive Anti-Discrimination Framework

The **Equality Act 2010** is widely regarded as the cornerstone of the UK's equality regime. It replaced and harmonized more than **116 prior laws** — including the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and Equal Pay Act 1970 — into one unified statute (UK Government, 2010). The Act prohibits discrimination based on **protected characteristics**: sex, race, disability, age, religion, sexual orientation, and others. For working women, its key provisions address **direct and indirect discrimination, harassment, and victimisation**.

One of its landmark aspects is the legal mandate for **equal pay** under **Section 66**, requiring that men and women performing “equal work” — whether identical, broadly similar, or of equal value — receive the same remuneration (EHRC, 2020). The Act also broadens the scope of workplace harassment to include any **unwanted conduct related to sex** that creates an intimidating, hostile, or humiliating environment. This explicitly covers inappropriate jokes, comments, and exclusionary behavior — issues that often fall into gray areas in less expansive legal regimes.

Enforcement is backed by the **Employment Tribunal system**, which adjudicates discrimination claims, and the **EHRC**, which issues statutory codes of practice and can initiate investigations. However, enforcement is not without hurdles. Tribunal fees — though largely abolished in 2017 after a landmark Supreme Court ruling — previously deterred claimants, and awareness of rights remains uneven among low-wage and migrant workers (UK Supreme Court, 2017).

The **gender pay gap** remains a persistent issue despite the Act's equal pay provisions. In response, the UK introduced **mandatory gender pay gap reporting** in 2017 for employers with over 250 staff, requiring them to publish pay disparities annually (UK Government, 2017). While this transparency has increased public and corporate accountability, critics argue that disclosure alone does not compel remediation.

2. Shared Parental Leave Regulations 2014: Reframing Care Responsibilities

A striking feature of the UK's framework is its move toward **shared caregiving responsibilities** through the **Shared Parental Leave (SPL) Regulations 2014**. These regulations allow eligible parents to **share up to 50 weeks of leave** and 37 weeks of pay following childbirth or adoption,

enabling mothers to transfer part of their maternity leave entitlement to their partner (UK Government, 2014).

The SPL system represents a deliberate policy choice: rather than reinforcing the idea that caregiving is “women’s work,” it seeks to normalize men taking time off, thereby reducing career penalties for women. Yet uptake remains low — only around **2–8% of eligible fathers** use SPL — due to cultural stigma, lack of awareness, and the fact that statutory pay (currently £172.48 per week or 90% of average earnings, whichever is lower) is not financially viable for many families (UK Parliament, 2021).

Still, SPL has symbolic and practical value. It has placed gender-neutral caregiving firmly in the legislative agenda and signaled that workplace equality is inseparable from rebalancing unpaid domestic labor.

3. Workplace Harassment: Guidance, Culture, and Enforcement

While harassment is covered under the Equality Act, the UK has built a **complementary ecosystem of guidelines and enforcement tools**. The **EHRC’s 2020 Technical Guidance on Sexual Harassment and Harassment at Work** provides detailed obligations for employers, recommending measures like anti-harassment policies, staff training, and clear reporting routes (EHRC, 2020). Though not law per se, these guidelines carry legal weight: Employment Tribunals can consider them when assessing whether an employer took “reasonable steps” to prevent harassment.

High-profile cases — from the *House of Commons* bullying scandal to harassment revelations in the *hospitality industry* — have driven cultural reckoning and policy reform. For example, the UK government recently consulted on proposals to reintroduce an employer “duty to prevent harassment,” including harassment by third parties like customers (Home Office, 2022).

Compared to India’s **Internal Complaints Committee** model, the UK relies on a mix of tribunal enforcement and regulatory oversight rather than mandated internal structures. While this allows flexibility, critics note that some smaller employers lack the infrastructure or incentive to develop robust systems without statutory compulsion.

4. Informal & Precarious Work: Challenges Beyond the Law

Like India, the UK faces gaps between legal protections and lived realities — though the **magnitude differs**. Approximately **3.8 million people** in the UK work in “insecure” roles, including gig economy jobs, zero-hour contracts, and casual labor (ONS, 2022). Many of these workers — a disproportionate number of whom are women — lack access to maternity leave, sick pay, and harassment protections in practice, despite being covered “on paper.”

Cases like *Uber v. Aslam* (2021), where the UK Supreme Court ruled that Uber drivers are “workers” entitled to basic protections, illustrate the tension between evolving work models and traditional legal categories (Supreme Court of the UK, 2021). The ruling extended rights like minimum wage and holiday pay to thousands of drivers, many of them women supplementing family income, and signaled a willingness to adapt the law to new realities.

5. Cultural and Institutional Strengths — and Limits

The UK's framework is often lauded for **robust enforcement mechanisms** — Employment Tribunals, EHRC oversight, and reporting mandates create multiple pathways for accountability. Public awareness campaigns, union advocacy, and widespread media coverage further bolster these protections.

Yet, issues persist. The **gender pay gap** stood at **14.3%** in 2022 (ONS, 2022). Women remain underrepresented in senior roles, and harassment, though formally prohibited, remains prevalent in certain industries like hospitality, law, and media (BBC, 2021). Critics also argue that austerity measures and underfunding of enforcement bodies like the EHRC have weakened the “teeth” of the law.

Conclusion: A Strong Framework, Uneven Realities

The UK provides a **comprehensive legal infrastructure** for gender equality at work — one that many countries, including India, look to as a model. The Equality Act sets clear, sweeping protections; SPL signals a progressive shift toward shared caregiving; and regulatory bodies enforce and refine these norms.

But the law's success depends on uptake and culture. Low SPL participation, persistent harassment, and the precarious status of gig workers reveal that even in advanced legal systems, rights can remain theoretical for many women. The UK demonstrates that while **legal frameworks are essential, they are not sufficient** — enforcement, awareness, and cultural change remain critical.

Comparative Analysis: Scope, Enforcement, and Gaps

Examining the laws of India and the United Kingdom side by side offers a valuable lens for understanding how legal systems can converge on shared goals — gender equity, workplace safety, and inclusion — while diverging sharply in **reach, enforcement, and lived experience**. Both nations claim strong statutory protections for women, but the realities of implementation tell two very different stories.

This comparative analysis is organized around four critical themes: **maternity and caregiving rights, sexual harassment and workplace safety, pay equity and economic inclusion**, and the persistent **informal sector gap**. Each theme illustrates not just where India and the UK succeed or falter, but also the lessons each system offers the other.

1. Maternity and Caregiving Rights: Quantity vs. Accessibility

At first glance, India appears to outperform the UK on maternity leave: the *Maternity Benefit Act (2017)* provides **26 weeks** of paid leave for women in the formal sector, compared to the UK's statutory maternity leave of **52 weeks**, of which only **39 weeks are paid** (UK Government, 2010; Ministry of Labour, 2017). On paper, India's six months of fully paid leave are more generous than the UK's initial 6 weeks at 90% pay followed by 33 weeks at a capped statutory rate (approx. £172/week).

Yet this **numeric generosity masks a structural flaw**. In India, only about **10% of working women** are in the formal sector and thus eligible for maternity leave (World Bank, 2020). Millions of informal workers — from farm laborers to domestic help — are excluded. By contrast, the UK's system, though less financially generous, reaches a far broader pool: statutory maternity pay covers most employees, and self-employed women may access **Maternity Allowance**.

Another contrast is the **Shared Parental Leave (SPL)** system in the UK. While uptake is low (2–8%), the very existence of SPL signals an effort to **de-gender caregiving**, offering fathers up to 50 weeks of leave to share with mothers (UK Parliament, 2021). India lacks an equivalent provision: paternity leave is limited (15 days for government employees, none mandated for private sector workers), reinforcing the idea that child care is women's work. This cultural gap has implications far beyond leave policy — it shapes who employers see as “committed” and who bears career penalties for parenthood.

Key takeaway: India offers **length without breadth**; the UK offers **breadth without full equality**. For India, the challenge is expanding protections beyond the privileged formal sector. For the UK, it's normalizing SPL use and improving financial support so caregiving truly becomes a shared responsibility.

2. Sexual Harassment and Workplace Safety: Codification vs. Cultural Adoption

India's *Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013)* is a direct response to the landmark **Vishaka Guidelines** and the recognition of harassment as a fundamental rights violation (Supreme Court of India, 1997). The Act mandates **Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs)** in every workplace with 10+ employees and **Local Complaints Committees (LCCs)** at the district level to cover unorganized sectors (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2013). This design embeds enforcement into the workplace itself — theoretically making redress local, fast, and accessible.

The UK takes a **different approach**: harassment is addressed under the broader **Equality Act 2010**, which prohibits unwanted conduct related to sex that creates a hostile or humiliating environment. Enforcement occurs through **Employment Tribunals**, with the **Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC)** providing guidance and oversight (EHRC, 2020). Unlike India, there is no mandated internal complaints body; instead, enforcement depends on individuals bringing claims or regulators intervening.

Which works better? Both models have strengths and weaknesses. India's ICC mandate theoretically democratizes access — every workplace must have a point of contact. But in practice, ICCs are often **tokenistic or nonexistent**: studies show that many companies set them up on paper but fail to train members or handle complaints fairly (Economic Times, 2021). Women in informal work rarely even know such committees exist.

The UK system benefits from **institutional capacity**: tribunals and EHRC investigations have delivered landmark rulings that reshape policy. Yet it relies on **individual litigation**, which can be intimidating and costly, particularly for vulnerable workers. Even after tribunal fees were abolished in 2017, fear of retaliation remains a barrier.

Cultural adoption is another fault line. In India, harassment is often underreported due to stigma, victim-blaming, and fear of job loss, especially for women in low-income jobs. In the UK, awareness is higher, but certain industries (hospitality, law, media) still harbor entrenched cultures of harassment despite legal prohibitions (BBC, 2021).

Key takeaway: India has **hyper-local structures but weak enforcement**; the UK has **robust enforcement tools but access barriers**. India can learn from the UK's institutional resourcing and awareness campaigns, while the UK might examine whether a workplace-based mechanism (like ICCs) could complement tribunal enforcement.

3. Pay Equity and Economic Inclusion: Shared Goals, Uneven Outcomes

Both India and the UK have had laws on **equal pay** for decades. India's *Equal Remuneration Act (1976)*, now subsumed into the *Code on Wages (2019)*, mandates “equal pay for equal work” and bars discrimination in recruitment (Government of India, 1976). The UK's Equal Pay Act 1970 — now integrated into the **Equality Act 2010** — does the same, bolstered by mandatory gender pay gap reporting since 2017 (UK Government, 2017).

On paper, the provisions are nearly identical: employers cannot pay women less than men for similar work, and women have recourse if they suspect disparities. Yet the **outcomes diverge sharply**.

- In the UK, the gender pay gap was **14.3% in 2022** — troubling, but declining (ONS, 2022).
- In India, women earn **~20% less** than men for comparable work (ILO, 2020), with gaps much larger in rural and informal sectors.

Two factors explain this divergence:

(a) Enforcement capacity. UK employers face reputational and regulatory pressure due to public pay gap disclosures. Media coverage has pushed major companies like the BBC and HSBC to explain disparities and commit to change (Guardian, 2019). India lacks an equivalent transparency mechanism: complaints are rare, inspections are sporadic, and penalties minimal.

(b) Labor force composition. In the UK, most women work in the formal economy with payslips, contracts, and access to tribunals. In India, the majority work informally, where wages are often cash-based and legal recourse impractical.

Key takeaway: Both systems promise equal pay; only the UK has built **accountability infrastructure** (e.g., mandatory reporting). For India, integrating transparency measures and strengthening inspections could translate legal promises into economic reality.

4. Informal Sector: The Elephant in the Room

Perhaps the starkest contrast — and the greatest limitation of India’s framework — is the **informal sector**. Roughly **90% of Indian women** work outside formal employment: as farm laborers, domestic workers, street vendors, or self-employed artisans (ILO, 2022). These women are almost entirely **excluded** from statutory maternity leave, ICC mechanisms, or equal pay enforcement.

The UK has its own “precarious” work — about 3.8 million people on gig work, zero-hour contracts, or casual jobs — but coverage gaps are narrower. Recent court rulings, like *Uber v. Aslam* (2021), have extended core rights (minimum wage, holiday pay) to gig workers (UK Supreme Court, 2021). The informal sector in India is more massive, more fragmented, and less reachable by law.

This isn’t just a legal gap — it’s a **policy challenge**. Extending protections to informal workers requires creative approaches: community-level redress systems, portable benefits, and integration of schemes like *Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana* into broader labor law.

Key takeaway: The UK struggles with new forms of precarious work, but India’s challenge is existential: without addressing the informal sector, most “workplace rights” remain theoretical.



5. Enforcement and Cultural Context: Laws on Paper vs. Laws in Practice

Both India and the UK show that **laws alone don't guarantee equality** — enforcement and culture matter.

- **Enforcement:** The UK benefits from a mature tribunal system and a well-resourced regulator (EHRC). India's enforcement relies heavily on **self-reporting** (e.g., ICCs) and understaffed labor departments. Penalties are weak, inspections rare.
- **Culture:** In the UK, there is broader social acceptance of gender equity norms, but “silent discrimination” persists (e.g., the motherhood penalty). In India, cultural taboos — around harassment, menstruation, and women's economic roles — create invisible barriers even when legal rights exist.

Key takeaway: Legal frameworks can **set standards**, but they cannot **shift culture overnight**. Both India and the UK show the need for legal reform **and** cultural change.

6. Lessons in Both Directions

The comparative view reveals **mutual lessons**:

- **What India can learn from the UK:**
 - Enforcement infrastructure** — tribunals, regulators, and transparency (e.g., gender pay gap reporting).
 - Shared caregiving policies** — SPL could inspire India to consider paternity leave or shared leave.
 - Regulatory resourcing** — investing in oversight, not just passing laws.
- **What the UK can learn from India:**
 - Local accountability mechanisms** — India's ICC model, if well-enforced, could inspire workplace-based prevention structures in the UK.
 - Ambitious maternity leave** — India's 26-week leave signals a bolder approach the UK could study for future reforms.

Conclusion: A Shared Goal, Different Journeys

India and the UK share the **aspiration** of gender equity at work. Both have built laws that, on paper, promise safety, equal pay, and maternity protections. Yet the **lived experience** of women diverges, shaped by enforcement capacity, labor market structures, and cultural attitudes.

The UK's system is **institutionally strong** but culturally imperfect; India's is **legislatively ambitious** but structurally fragile. Understanding these contrasts is essential — not just to



critique, but to **build bridges**. In the end, each country's journey reveals that **laws are not endpoints, but starting points** for the deeper work of equity.

Support Mechanisms & Societal Context

Laws provide the scaffolding for gender equity, but they are not self-executing. Their success depends on **support mechanisms** — from NGOs to workplace programs — and the broader **societal context** in which those laws operate. Both India and the UK have built ecosystems around their legal frameworks, but their nature, reach, and effectiveness vary widely.

1. India: Civil Society as a Parallel Safety Net

In India, **civil society organizations** play an outsized role in translating laws into lived reality. NGOs like **SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association)** advocate for informal women workers, while groups like **Jagori** conduct awareness campaigns about workplace harassment rights. These organizations often act as intermediaries, **educating women about their rights, assisting with complaints, and even accompanying them to legal hearings.**

This is particularly vital because India's enforcement architecture is **fragmented and under-resourced**. For example, while the Sexual Harassment Act mandates Internal Complaints Committees, countless companies fail to constitute them, and district-level Local Complaints Committees often exist only on paper. NGOs fill this vacuum by pressuring employers, training ICC members, and publicizing egregious violations.

The **private sector** is also an increasingly important actor. Large corporations — especially multinationals — have adopted **global HR policies** that go beyond Indian statutory requirements, introducing gender-neutral parental leave, comprehensive anti-harassment training, and grievance hotlines. Yet these practices rarely filter down to **smaller businesses** or the informal sector, where most women work.

The **societal context** complicates even the best efforts. Cultural taboos surrounding harassment and maternity remain strong. Women fear stigma, retaliation, or being labeled “troublemakers,” which suppresses reporting rates. Legal aid is often inaccessible, especially in rural areas.

In short, **India's progress relies heavily on non-state actors**, but their reach is uneven, and systemic cultural barriers blunt their impact.

2. The United Kingdom: Institutionalized Support

The UK's support structures are **more institutionalized**. Public bodies like the **Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC)** don't just enforce laws — they produce **statutory codes of practice**, offer **training resources**, and conduct **systemic investigations** into industries or companies.

Unions, though weaker than in their mid-20th-century peak, remain important advocates for women's workplace rights, particularly around equal pay disputes. Cases like the **Asda equal pay litigation**, brought with union backing, have established key precedents and raised public awareness.

Employer practices are also highly developed. Many large UK companies maintain **dedicated equality officers**, internal ombuds services, and transparent grievance processes. Initiatives like the **gender pay gap reporting mandate** have forced employers to confront their disparities and, in many cases, explain or remedy them.

The societal context is **more supportive**, but not flawless. Awareness of rights is high, and media scrutiny ensures that high-profile violations receive attention. Yet cultural norms still slow progress: uptake of Shared Parental Leave is stunted by the stigma men face for taking leave, and harassment persists in sectors like hospitality despite strong laws and public awareness campaigns.

3. Comparative Observations

The contrast between India and the UK reveals **two models of support**.

- In India, support mechanisms are **patchwork and grassroots-driven**: NGOs and informal networks carry the burden where state enforcement falters.
- In the UK, support is **embedded into institutions**: regulators, tribunals, and corporate compliance departments ensure legal obligations have practical bite.

Neither model is flawless. India's reliance on NGOs leads to **uneven coverage** and an over-dependence on donor-driven programs. The UK's reliance on formal institutions risks alienating marginalized workers who may still distrust legal systems or lack resources to pursue claims.

4. The Role of Culture in Shaping Effectiveness

Both systems demonstrate that **culture mediates law**. In India, cultural stigma around harassment, pregnancy, and women's autonomy means laws often go uninvoked. In the UK, cultural attitudes around gender roles — particularly in caregiving — limit the impact of progressive policies like Shared Parental Leave.

Support mechanisms can soften these cultural barriers, but they cannot fully erase them. True equity requires **legal reform, institutional support, and cultural transformation working in tandem**.

Conclusion

The comparative exploration of workplace laws for women in **India** and the **United Kingdom** reveals a shared aspiration — a commitment to equity, safety, and dignity — but profoundly different realities in how those aspirations unfold.

Both nations have built **ambitious legal frameworks**. India's *Maternity Benefit Act*, *Sexual Harassment Act*, and *Equal Remuneration Act* demonstrate legislative intent to protect and empower women, while the UK's *Equality Act 2010*, *Shared Parental Leave Regulations*, and

gender pay reporting requirements stand as global benchmarks for comprehensive equality legislation. On paper, these frameworks promise fairness, safety, and opportunity.

Yet, **law on paper is not law in practice.**

India's laws are **progressive in scope** — its maternity leave, for example, is among the longest in the world — but their reach is painfully narrow. With nearly 90% of Indian women working in the informal sector, protections often stop where the formal workplace ends. Mechanisms like Internal Complaints Committees for harassment are theoretically transformative, but in practice, they are inconsistently implemented, under-resourced, and often unknown to those who need them most.

The UK, by contrast, has **institutional strength**. Laws are supported by regulators, tribunals, and reporting mandates that ensure compliance and accountability. Yet the UK faces its own blind spots: Shared Parental Leave remains underutilized due to cultural stigma, harassment persists in certain industries despite strong enforcement tools, and women continue to experience pay gaps and underrepresentation in leadership roles.

What this comparison underscores is that **no country has found the perfect formula**. India's ambition is undercut by structural weakness; the UK's institutional strength is undermined by cultural inertia.

The lesson is clear: **law is only the first step.**

For India, the priority must be **expansion and implementation**. Laws that cover only the formal sector leave millions invisible. Extending maternity protections, harassment redressal, and wage equality into the informal economy will require creative solutions — portable benefits, community-level complaint structures, and stronger enforcement mechanisms.

For the UK, the next frontier is **cultural transformation**. Policies like Shared Parental Leave and gender pay reporting have laid groundwork, but genuine equality will require dismantling ingrained biases about who “should” care for children, who “belongs” in leadership, and how harassment is normalized in certain work environments.

In both nations, **support structures and culture matter as much as the statutes themselves**. NGOs, unions, advocacy groups, and employer initiatives form the connective tissue between the promise of law and the reality of lived experience.

Ultimately, the comparison between India and the UK shows that progress is neither linear nor uniform. But it also reveals that the tools for change already exist. Laws can set standards; institutions can enforce them; culture can evolve.

The challenge — and the opportunity — is to weave these threads together into a fabric strong enough to hold up **a world of work where women are not just present, but truly equal.**

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