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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Gender, Caregiving, and the Law in Indian Research Funding

 **THE HINDU**

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Are age-limit relaxations in research grants a genuine remedy for structural gender inequality in Indian science — or do they merely paper over a systemic caregiving burden that policy refuses to name?"

EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

The Hindu argues that women researchers in India face structural institutional barriers — not mere gaps in individual merit — that age-limit relaxations in research grant schemes can only partially address. With women representing approximately 28% of India's researchers as of UNESCO 2021 data (rising to ~33% per Elsevier 2024, now at the global average), the editorial calls for a gender-sensitive research funding architecture anchored in Articles 15(3) and 16 of the Constitution: childcare as a legitimate grant expenditure, rolling career-stage eligibility replacing chronological age limits, and dedicated re-entry programmes for women returning after career breaks.

THE LEAKY PIPELINE PROBLEM

India's universities and research institutions graduate women scientists at roughly equal rates to men at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Yet by the time one reaches the post-doctoral and early-faculty stages — the decisive career inflection points — women have disproportionately exited. This is the **leaky pipeline**, a metaphor widely used in science policy to describe the progressive attrition of women from academia not because of intellectual deficit but because of structural incompatibility between research career demands and the caregiving burdens that social norms assign overwhelmingly to women.

The consequences are measurable. India's share of women researchers was approximately 28 per cent as of the UNESCO Science Report 2021 — though the Elsevier 2024 gender-in-research report notes this has risen to approximately 33 per cent, now at par with the global average. India remains far below the levels in peer economies: Brazil (46%, though sex-disaggregated data has gaps and this should be treated as an estimate based

on UNESCO 2021), Argentina (52%), and even China (41%, approximate figure based on UNESCO 2021 data). In absolute numbers this is a substantial talent underutilisation problem in a country where ANRF's five-year Rs 50,000 crore research investment programme is premised on expanding the national research base.

The leaky pipeline has known choke points in the Indian context:

CAREER STAGE	ATTRITION DRIVER
Post-graduation to PhD	Marriage pressure; relocation for spouse's career
PhD to post-doc	Childbirth; lack of maternity leave in fellowship programmes
Post-doc to assistant professor	Age limits for early-career grants; institutional nepotism
Assistant professor to tenured faculty	Second childbirth; service obligations without childcare support

Each of these is institutional failure, not individual failure. A woman who takes two years off for childbirth and returns to research is not less capable — she is structurally penalised by age-based eligibility thresholds designed in an era when a researcher was assumed to be male and unburdened by reproductive labour.

THE ANRF AGE-LIMIT QUESTION

The **Science and Engineering Research Board (SERB)**, now subsumed into the **Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF)** under the ANRF Act, 2023, has long operated early-career grant schemes with age limits. The **Start-up Research Grant (SRG)** scheme (now replaced by the PM Early Career Research Grant, PM-ECRG, under ANRF), for instance, permitted applications up to age 42, with a relaxation to 45 years for women candidates. The ANRF Act itself does not mandate a specific age-limit structure, delegating this to the governing board.

The 45-year ceiling for women — a 3-year relaxation over the base limit of 42 — is a recognition of the problem. It is not a solution. Three years is inadequate to absorb the career time lost to multiple maternity events, spousal relocation, and care of elderly dependents (which, in India, falls disproportionately on daughters-in-law). The 45-year ceiling remains a ceiling: a woman who takes a prolonged career break and returns at 46 has no more access to the scheme than one who never took a break. More importantly, even the 42/45 structure is age-based rather than career-stage-based — it still penalises late starters and those with irregular research timelines.

The editorial argues for a more fundamental reorientation: **replace age-based eligibility with career-stage eligibility**. Count years of active research experience from the PhD award, excluding documented career breaks for caregiving, rather than counting years from birth. This is the approach adopted in several peer grant systems and is the single most powerful de-gendering of research funding structures available at low fiscal cost.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

The UPSC demands understanding of how social policy intersects with constitutional rights. The constitutional basis for gender-sensitive research funding policy is not merely a policy preference — it is grounded in fundamental rights:

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISION	RELEVANCE TO RESEARCH FUNDING
Article 15(1)	State shall not discriminate on grounds of sex
Article 15(3)	State may make special provisions for women — enabling positive action in grant design
Article 16	Equality of opportunity in matters of public employment — applies to publicly funded research positions
Article 21	Right to life and livelihood — includes the right to practise one’s profession without structural discrimination

The Supreme Court has progressively strengthened this framework. In **Anuj Garg v. Hotel Association of India (2008)**, the Court held that legislation ostensibly protective of women must not become a vehicle for stereotyping or exclusion. A grant scheme that imposes age limits premised on the assumption that women’s careers are uninterrupted — and then offers a token relaxation — risks being challenged on precisely this ground: it formalises a stereotype rather than dismantling it.

In **Joseph Shine v. Union of India (2018)**, the Court reiterated that laws premised on gender stereotypes violate the Constitution’s guarantee of individual dignity. The principle extends to regulatory and administrative frameworks, not just legislation.

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

India need not design this framework from first principles. Comparable democracies with active research funding systems have developed more sophisticated models:

Germany — Emmy Noether Programme (DFG): The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft’s Emmy Noether Programme funds independent junior research group leaders for six years. Eligibility is counted from the doctoral degree award — not from birth — with explicit provisions for career interruptions for caregiving (up to 2 years per child under age 12). The programme is gender-neutral in its stated terms but structurally accommodating to women’s career timelines.

United Kingdom — UKRI Grant Extensions: UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) mandates that all grant holders can apply for no-cost extensions to grant timelines for maternity, paternity, and adoption leave. Crucially, UKRI explicitly recognises **childcare costs as a legitimate grant expenditure** — a research assistant at a UK university can charge nursery fees against her research grant budget when caregiving constraints directly affect research delivery. This is the model The Hindu endorses for India.

European Research Council: The ERC’s Starting Grant (for researchers within 7 years of PhD) and Consolidator Grant (within 12 years) count exclusively from the doctoral award, explicitly excluding career breaks for maternity, long-term illness, and parental responsibilities. India’s ANRF has the **statutory** authority to adopt an identical framework without legislative change.

WHAT A GENDER-SENSITIVE ANRF POLICY WOULD REQUIRE

The editorial’s prescriptions translate into five actionable policy changes:

- ① **Career-stage eligibility across all ANRF schemes:** Measure eligibility from the date of PhD award, subtract documented career breaks (certified by institutional leave records), and apply the resulting “active career years” metric. Cap at 8 years post-PhD for early-career grants rather than at a chronological age.
- ② **Childcare as legitimate grant expenditure:** Allow researchers to claim childcare costs — including crèche fees, part-time domestic help directly enabling research hours, and travel childcare for conference attendance — against grant budgets, as UKRI permits.
- ③ **Dedicated re-entry fellowships:** Create a ring-fenced ANRF fellowship category for women with PhDs who have been absent from active research for 3 or more years due to caregiving responsibilities, with a structured 2-year bridging grant to rebuild publication records and laboratory networks.
- ④ **Institutional maternity audit:** Require all ANRF-receiving institutions to publish annual data on maternity leave uptake, post-maternity grant conversions, and gender composition at each career stage — making the pipeline visible and holding institutions accountable.
- ⑤ **Relocation flexibility:** Allow ANRF grantees to transfer grants to a new institution if they relocate for a spouse’s career — currently grant transfers are administratively cumbersome and effectively penalise dual-career academic couples, disproportionately affecting women who are statistically more likely to relocate.

UPSC MAINS ANALYSIS

GS Paper 2 — Social Justice, Governance, and Constitutional Rights

- **Article 15(3) jurisprudence:** State's power to make special provisions for women is enabling, not obligatory — but once the state creates a framework (ANRF grant scheme), it must not embed structural discrimination within it. The Anuj Garg standard applies.
- **Institutional accountability:** ANRF Act 2023 creates an arms-length body — Parliament's oversight mechanism is critical. Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha science committees should mandate gender disaggregated reporting from ANRF.
- **Social justice in professional contexts:** Gender-sensitive policy is not welfare — it is efficiency. A country that discards 70% of its women researchers at the post-doctoral stage is choosing to underperform in science.

GS Paper 3 — Science, Technology, and R&D Policy

- **ANRF Act 2023:** Replaces SERB; Rs 50,000 crore over 5 years; private sector expected to contribute majority; PM as ex-officio Chair; Secretary DST as Member Secretary.
- **India's researcher gender gap:** ~28% women as of UNESCO Science Report 2021; rising to ~33% per Elsevier 2024 gender-in-research report, now at par with global average; structural causes, not meritocratic causes.
- **Global best practice:** UKRI childcare expenditure model; ERC career-stage eligibility; DFG Emmy Noether Programme — all available as templates for ANRF governing board adoption.
- **R&D investment context:** India spends ~0.65% of GDP on R&D; target 2% under STI Policy 2013, never achieved; gender-inclusive policy design is one lever to expand effective researcher supply without increasing gross expenditure.

Keywords: ANRF Act 2023, Anusandhan National Research Foundation, SERB SRG scheme, PM-ECRG PM Early Career Research Grant, gender gap in research India, UNESCO Science Report 2021, Elsevier 2024 gender-in-research report, leaky pipeline women STEM, Article 15(3) Constitution, Anuj Garg v. Hotel Association 2008, Joseph Shine v. Union of India 2018, UKRI childcare grant expenditure, Emmy Noether Programme DFG, ERC Starting Grant, career-stage eligibility, re-entry fellowship, maternity extension research grant, women in science India policy.

The deeper argument in The Hindu's editorial is that gender-insensitive institutional design is a research productivity problem, not merely a social justice concern. India cannot simultaneously aspire to become a global science power through ANRF's Rs 50,000 crore programme and continue to haemorrhage trained women scientists at the post-doctoral stage because grant timelines do not accommodate childbirth. The constitutional framework already permits the remedy — what is missing is the policy will to operationalise it within the ANRF's governing board mandate.

Established by the Anusandhan National Research Foundation Act, 2023; subsumes SERB; Rs 50,000 crore over 5 years (private sector expected to contribute majority); PM is ex-officio President; aims to seed, grow, and promote R&D across academic and research institutions.

UNESCO Science Report 2021 recorded women at approximately 28% of India's total researcher population, below the global average of ~33%. The Elsevier 2024 gender-in-research report indicates this has since risen to approximately 33%, now at par with the global average – a positive trend that nonetheless leaves structural barriers intact.

The SRG was an early-career grant scheme under SERB; now replaced by the PM Early Career Research Grant (PM-ECRG) under ANRF. Upper age limit is 42 years (45 years for women, a 3-year relaxation); one of several SERB schemes now under ANRF's portfolio.

“Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children.” This is the constitutional anchor for any positive-action policy in research funding that specifically addresses women's structural disadvantages.

UK Research and Innovation allows researchers to claim childcare costs directly against research grant budgets where caregiving responsibilities demonstrably constrain research hours – one of the most practical gender-equity interventions in global research funding.

Supreme Court held that protective legislation for women must not perpetuate stereotypes or become a vehicle for exclusion; the standard applies to all state regulatory frameworks touching women's professional access.

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