



Research Article

Gender Inclusion and Institutional Practices in Indian Educational Spaces: A Sociological Analysis

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Abstract

The inclusion of gender in education has become a central issue in academic and policy debates, particularly within those societies afflicted by profoundly entrenched structures of inequality. Educational institutions in India are constructed as key sites where the cause of social justice and gender equity get furthered, but at the same time continue to perpetuate hierarchies between genders through formal institutional structures, informal norms, and everyday practices. This article explores the construction of gender inclusion in Indian educational contexts by applying a sociological and policy perspective to both institutional practices as well as governance structures that frame access, participation and learning outcome for various genders. Drawing on feminist theory, sociology of education, and an extensive review of secondary literature and policy documents, the study analyses both progress and persistent gaps in achieving gender-equitable education. The paper argues that while policy interventions have significantly expanded access for girls and women, substantive gender inclusion requires deeper institutional transformation, gender-sensitive pedagogies, and sustained policy commitment. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for gender-transformative educational policies and inclusive institutional cultures to ensure education functions as a genuine instrument of social change.

Keywords

Gender, Inclusion, Education, Policy, Institutional Practices

1. Introduction

Education has long been recognized as a critical instrument for social transformation, human development, and the realization of democratic ideals. From a sociological perspective, educational institutions are not merely spaces for the transmission of knowledge; they are social institutions deeply embedded within broader structures of power, inequality, and cultural norms [8]. In societies marked by hierarchical social relations, such as India, education simultaneously functions as a site of empowerment and a mechanism for the reproduction of social inequalities. Gender inequality has been one of the most

persistent and complex challenges within the Indian education system. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and decades of policy interventions, gendered disparities continue to shape access to education, participation within institutions, and educational outcomes. Historically, women's education in India was constrained by patriarchal norms that prioritized domestic roles, restricted mobility, and limited access to public spaces. Although social reform movements and post-independence state policies expanded educational opportunities

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for women, deeply entrenched gender norms continue to influence institutional practices and everyday interactions within educational spaces [5].

In recent decades, India has made measurable progress in improving female literacy rates and school enrolment, particularly at the primary level. Government initiatives, welfare schemes, and international commitments have contributed to narrowing gender gaps in basic education. However, sociological research indicates that quantitative improvements in enrolment do not necessarily translate into qualitative inclusion. Gender disparities persist in secondary and higher education, subject choices, leadership positions, classroom participation, and institutional decision-making [15, 18].

Gender inclusion in education, therefore, extends beyond numerical parity between boys and girls. It encompasses issues of dignity, safety, voice, representation, and agency within educational institutions. Subtle forms of discrimination such as gender-biased curricula, unequal teacher attention, restrictive institutional rules, and unequal access to leadership often operate beneath the surface of formally gender-neutral systems. These practices contribute to what feminist scholars describe as the “hidden curriculum” of gender socialization in education [3, 4].

The relevance of gender inclusion in education has gained renewed policy significance in the context of contemporary reforms. The National Education Policy 2020 explicitly recognizes equity and inclusion as foundational principles and acknowledges that gender disparities are shaped by intersections of caste, class, region, and socio-economic status. At the same time, global frameworks such as the Education 2030 Agenda emphasize gender equality as central to sustainable development [16].¹ These developments highlight the growing recognition of education as a key site for advancing gender justice [17]. Gender inclusion in education extends beyond numerical parity in enrolment. It encompasses equitable access, meaningful participation, fair representation, safety, dignity, and comparable educational outcomes for individuals of all genders. Over the past few decades, India has made substantial progress in improving female literacy rates and increasing girls’ enrolment at primary and secondary levels. Nevertheless, gender disparities continue to persist in higher education participation, subject choices, leadership positions, and institutional decision-making [10]. These disparities are often reinforced through everyday institutional practices that appear gender-neutral but operate in gendered ways.

Despite progressive policy language, a gap often exists between policy intent and institutional practice. Educational institutions frequently struggle to translate gender-inclusive policies into everyday practices due to cultural resistance, administrative limitations, and entrenched power relations. A sociological analysis is therefore essential to understand how institutions function as gendered spaces and how policies are mediated through organizational cultures and social norms.

Against this background, this paper seeks to examine gender inclusion in Indian educational spaces through a sociological and policy-oriented lens. It explores how institutional practices, cultural expectations, and governance frameworks shape gendered experiences in schools, colleges, and universities. With the analysis of feminist theory, sociology of education, and empirical literature, the paper aims to critically assess both progress and limitations in achieving gender-inclusive education. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing academic and policy debates on equity, inclusion, and the transformative role of education in Indian society.

The paper also seeks to critically examine gender inclusion in Indian educational spaces by integrating sociological theory with a policy-oriented analysis. It explores how institutional practices, cultural norms, and education policies interact to shape gendered experiences within schools, colleges, and universities. Through situating the discussion within feminist and sociological perspectives on education, the paper aims to contribute to academic debates on inclusion and offer insights relevant for policy formulation and institutional reform.

2. Gender and Education: A Sociological Perspective

From a sociological standpoint, gender is understood as a socially constructed category shaped by cultural meanings, power relations, and institutional arrangements rather than merely biological differences. Educational institutions play a central role in the socialization of gender by transmitting norms, values, and expectations related to masculinity and femininity. Through curricula, pedagogy, assessment, and organizational structures, education systems contribute to the reproduction or transformation of gender relations.

Classical sociological perspectives viewed education as a mechanism for social integration and role allocation. Functionalist approaches emphasized the role of education in preparing individuals for adult roles, often assuming gender-differentiated functions within society. However, critical and conflict-oriented perspectives challenge this view by highlighting how education reproduces existing inequalities. From this angle, schools and universities serve as sites where dominant social groups maintain their advantage, including the perpetuation of patriarchal gender relations.

In India, gender norms related to domestic responsibilities, mobility, safety, and employment opportunities significantly influence educational trajectories. Girls and women often face additional constraints in accessing and continuing education, particularly in rural areas and among marginalized communities. Educational institutions frequently reflect these broader societal norms, thereby reinforcing gendered expectations rather than challenging them. Educational institutions reproduce

¹ UNESCO. (2015). Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action. UNESCO Publishing

gender inequality through formal and informal practices, including gendered curricula, evaluation patterns, and leadership structures. [1, 3, 6]. A sociological analysis of gender inclusion therefore requires attention to both structural conditions and everyday institutional practices.

3. Feminist Theoretical Frameworks

Feminist theories provide critical analytical tools for examining gender inequality in education. Liberal feminist perspectives focus on equal access and legal reforms, emphasizing the importance of policies that ensure girls and women have the same educational opportunities as men. In the Indian context, this approach underpins many state-led initiatives aimed at increasing female enrolment and reducing dropout rates.

Radical feminist perspectives, however, argue that gender inequality is rooted in deep-seated patriarchal structures that cannot be dismantled solely through access-oriented reforms. From this viewpoint, educational institutions themselves are gendered organizations that reproduce male dominance through leadership structures, knowledge production, and disciplinary practices. Addressing inequality therefore requires a transformation of institutional cultures and power relations.

Intersectional feminist approaches further deepen the analysis by recognizing that gender intersects with caste, class, religion, ethnicity, and region. In Indian educational spaces, the experiences of women are highly differentiated. Dalit, Adivasi, minority, and economically disadvantaged women often encounter multiple and overlapping forms of exclusion. Gender inclusion policies that fail to account for these intersections risk benefiting only relatively privileged groups.

4. Review of Literature

The literature on gender and education in India is extensive and interdisciplinary, encompassing sociology, education studies, gender studies, and public policy. Research consistently indicates that government interventions such as free and compulsory education, mid-day meal schemes, scholarships, and conditional cash transfer programs have contributed to increased enrolment of girls, particularly at the primary level. These measures have been effective in reducing gender gaps in basic education.

However, scholars also document persistent challenges beyond access. Studies highlight high dropout rates among girls at the secondary level, often linked to early marriage, household responsibilities, safety concerns, and lack of sanitation facilities. Gendered patterns in subject choice are widely reported, with women underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines and overrepresented in arts and caregiving-related fields.

Research on higher education points to the underrepresentation of women in faculty positions and institutional leadership. Even where women are numerically present, they often

face subtle forms of discrimination, including limited mentoring opportunities, gender bias in evaluation, and work-life balance challenges. The literature also emphasizes the role of hidden curricula and informal practices in reinforcing gender norms. Overall, existing studies suggest that while policy efforts have improved access, institutional practices continue to reproduce gender inequalities in complex ways.

5. Research Objectives and Research Questions

5.1. Research Objectives

The present study aims to critically examine gender inclusion in Indian educational spaces through a sociological and policy-oriented perspective. The specific objectives of the study are:

- 1) To examine the sociological foundations of gender inequality within Indian educational institutions.
- 2) To analyze how institutional practices in schools, colleges, and universities shape gendered experiences of students and educators.
- 3) To review existing education policies and governance frameworks aimed at promoting gender inclusion in India.
- 4) To assess the extent to which policy interventions have translated into substantive gender inclusion within educational institutions.
- 5) To explore the intersection of gender with caste, class, and socio-economic status in shaping educational access and participation.
- 6) To suggest policy and institutional strategies for achieving gender-transformative and inclusive educational environments.

5.2. Research Questions

Based on the above objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How is gender socially constructed and reproduced within Indian educational institutions?
- 2) What institutional practices contribute to inclusion or exclusion across different educational levels?
- 3) How do education policies in India conceptualize and address gender inclusion?
- 4) To what extent do existing policy frameworks succeed in promoting substantive gender equality in educational spaces?
- 5) How do intersecting social factors such as caste, class, and region influence gendered educational experiences?
- 6) What policy and institutional reforms are necessary to strengthen gender inclusion in Indian education?

6. Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical research design based exclusively on secondary data sources. This study adopts a qualitative scoping review methodology to systematically examine gender inclusion and institutional practices in Indian educational spaces. A scoping review is appropriate for mapping key concepts, identifying research gaps, and synthesizing existing literature in areas where knowledge is dispersed across disciplines. A secondary data-based methodology is particularly appropriate for examining gender inclusion in education, as it allows for a critical synthesis of existing theoretical insights, historical evidences, census and NFHS data, empirical findings, and policy frameworks without the ethical and logistical constraints of primary data collection. This approach is widely accepted in sociological and social policy research, especially for conceptual and review-based academic work.

6.1. Sources of Data

The study draws upon a diverse range of secondary sources, including:

- 1) Peer-reviewed journal articles in sociology, education, gender studies, and social policy.
- 2) Academic books and edited volumes by established scholars.
- 3) Government policy documents and reports, particularly national education policies and official publications.
- 4) Reports and frameworks published by international organizations such as UNESCO and the World Bank, NFHS.

These sources were selected to ensure both theoretical depth and policy relevance, with a specific focus on the Indian context.

6.2. Method of Analysis

The collected literature and policy documents were analyzed using thematic and interpretive analysis. Key themes related to gender inclusion such as access, participation, institutional practices, curriculum representation, governance, and policy implementation were identified and examined. Feminist sociological perspectives and theories of education were used as analytical lenses to interpret how gender inequality is produced and sustained within educational institutions. Policy documents were analyzed critically to assess the gap between policy intent and institutional practice. This involved examining how gender inclusion is conceptualized in policy language and how effectively it addresses structural and cultural dimensions of inequality.

7. Scope and Limitations

The scope of the study is limited to an analysis of Indian

educational spaces, with particular emphasis on schools, colleges, and universities. As a secondary data-based study, it does not include primary empirical evidence or statistical analysis. However, the reliance on well-established scholarly literature and official policy documents ensures academic rigor and analytical validity. Despite these limitations, the methodology enables a comprehensive sociological understanding of gender inclusion and provides a strong foundation for policy-oriented discussion and future empirical research.

8. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in sociological theories of education and feminist perspectives on gender inequality. It conceptualizes gender inclusion in education as an outcome shaped by the interaction of structural factors, institutional practices, and policy frameworks. At the structural level, broader social forces such as patriarchy, caste hierarchy, class inequality, and regional disparities influence access to and experiences within education. These structural factors shape societal expectations regarding gender roles, mobility, and participation in public institutions. At the institutional level, educational spaces operate through formal mechanisms; such as admission policies, curricula, assessment systems, and governance structures, and informal practices, including classroom interactions, disciplinary norms, and campus culture. These institutional practices mediate the impact of structural inequalities and play a crucial role in either reinforcing or challenging gender norms. At the policy level, constitutional provisions, national education policies, and programmatic interventions aim to promote gender inclusion by addressing barriers to access, safety, and participation. However, the effectiveness of these policies depends on their implementation within institutional contexts shaped by existing power relations.

The framework also incorporates an intersectional dimension, recognizing that gender does not operate in isolation but intersects with caste, class, religion, and socio-economic status to produce differentiated educational experiences. Gender inclusion is thus understood as a dynamic and multidimensional process, rather than a static outcome. In this framework, gender-inclusive educational outcomes such as equitable participation, representation, agency, and leadership emerge when supportive policies align with inclusive institutional practices and when structural inequalities are actively challenged. This conceptualization guides the analysis throughout the paper and provides a coherent lens for examining gender inclusion in Indian educational spaces.

9. Institutional Practices and Gendered Experiences

Educational institutions operate through a combination of

formal rules and informal norms that shape gendered experiences. Admission policies, infrastructure design, hostel regulations, dress codes, and disciplinary mechanisms often reflect assumptions about gender, safety, and morality. For instance, restrictive hostel timings and surveillance practices for female students are frequently justified as protective measures but may limit autonomy and reinforce notions of vulnerability. Curricula and textbooks play a significant role in shaping gender perceptions. Content analysis studies have shown that educational materials often portray men and women in stereotypical roles, with men depicted as leaders, scientists, and decision-makers, while women are shown in domestic or supportive roles. Such representations contribute to the internalization of gender norms and influence students' aspirations.

Pedagogical practices, including teacher-student interactions, classroom participation, and assessment methods, further shape gender inclusion. Teachers' expectations and unconscious biases can influence students' confidence and performance. Male students may receive more encouragement in technical subjects, while female students are often praised for compliance and discipline. These everyday practices cumulatively contribute to the gendered nature of educational spaces.

9.1. Policy Frameworks for Gender Inclusion in India

India has adopted a range of constitutional, legislative, and policy measures aimed at promoting gender equality in education. Constitutional provisions guarantee equality and prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex. National education policies have consistently emphasized universal access, equity, and inclusion, with specific attention to girls' education. Recent policy frameworks highlight gender inclusion as a key objective, linking education with broader goals of empowerment and social justice. Targeted schemes provide financial incentives, infrastructural support, and academic assistance to encourage girls' participation. At the higher education level, policies emphasize gender sensitisation and inclusion in educational participation. The policy framework for gender inclusion in education in India is grounded in constitutional mandates, national development goals, and international commitments to gender equality [13, 14]. Education has been recognized as a fundamental right and a critical instrument for achieving social justice, with gender inclusion positioned as a core objective of educational planning and governance.

9.2. Constitutional and Legal Foundations

The Constitution of India provides a robust legal foundation for gender equality in education. Articles 14, 15, and 16 guarantee equality before the law and prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, while Article 15 (3) enables the State to make special provisions for women. Article 21A, which recognizes education as a fundamental right, further strengthens the state's obligation to ensure inclusive and equitable education

for all children. These constitutional provisions establish gender inclusion not as a policy choice but as a legal and moral responsibility of the state. In addition to constitutional safeguards, various legislative measures and regulatory guidelines reinforce gender equity within educational institutions. Legal mechanisms addressing sexual harassment and discrimination aim to create safer educational environments, particularly in higher education institutions, where gender-based power asymmetries are often pronounced.

9.3. National Education Policies and Gender Inclusion

India's education policies have consistently emphasized gender equality, though the conceptualization and scope of inclusion have evolved over time. Earlier policy frameworks primarily focused on expanding access to education for girls through enrolment drives, incentives, and infrastructure development. These access-oriented strategies played a significant role in narrowing gender gaps at the primary level, especially in rural and disadvantaged regions [15]. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant shift by explicitly recognizing gender inclusion as part of a broader commitment to equity and inclusion. The policy acknowledges that gender disparities in education are shaped by intersecting factors such as caste, socio-economic status, disability, and geographical location. It emphasizes targeted interventions, gender-sensitive pedagogy, and institutional accountability to ensure that inclusion goes beyond access to encompass participation and outcomes [9].

NEP 2020 also highlights the importance of increasing female participation in higher education, particularly in science and technology disciplines, and calls for institutional mechanisms to support women's leadership and research careers. However, the effectiveness of these provisions depends largely on their translation into concrete institutional practices.

9.4. Programmatic Interventions and Welfare Schemes

A wide range of government schemes have been implemented to promote girls' education, particularly among marginalized communities. Scholarships, conditional cash transfer programs, free uniforms and textbooks, and mid-day meal schemes have been instrumental in improving enrolment and retention rates at the school level. These programs address economic barriers that disproportionately affect girls' access to education, especially in low-income households [16]. While such welfare-oriented interventions have yielded measurable gains, sociological studies caution that they often frame girls' education in instrumental terms, emphasizing demographic and economic outcomes rather than empowerment and agency. As a result, these schemes may improve participation without necessarily challenging gender norms related to early marriage, domestic labor, and restricted mobility [5].

9.5. Gender Inclusion in Higher Education Policies

Policy attention to gender inclusion in higher education has increased in recent years, particularly in relation to safety, representation, and leadership. Guidelines mandating internal grievance mechanisms and gender sensitization programs aim to address harassment and discrimination within campuses. Additionally, fellowships and affirmative measures seek to enhance women's participation in research and academic careers.

Despite these initiatives, women remain underrepresented in senior academic and administrative positions. Research suggests that institutional cultures, informal networks, and evaluation practices continue to disadvantage women, highlighting the limitations of policy measures that focus solely on formal equality [11]. A sociological perspective underscores the need for policies that address institutional power relations and everyday practices, rather than relying exclusively on regulatory compliance. It can be seen on the ground that there are lesser number of women seen in the institutional level in teaching area, at a university level the participation of the female professor and other non-teaching work, compare to the women the men are in more number. The enrolment at the university level students also shows the same data, the female students are lesser compare to those male students. [12]. While in the primary and high school level the enrolment of the female is higher, however, the female participation in the higher studies is lesser.

9.6. Limitations and the Need for Gender-Transformative Policies

Although India's policy framework demonstrates a strong commitment to gender inclusion, several limitations persist. Policy implementation is often uneven across regions and institutions due to resource constraints, administrative capacity, and socio-cultural resistance. Moreover, many policies adopt a protectionist approach that reinforces notions of female vulnerability rather than promoting autonomy and agency. A gender-transformative policy approach requires moving beyond welfare and access-oriented strategies to actively challenge patriarchal norms embedded within educational institutions. This includes revising curricula to reflect diverse gender roles, promoting inclusive pedagogies, ensuring equitable representation in leadership, and strengthening accountability mechanisms. Intersectional policy design is also essential to address the compounded disadvantages faced by women from marginalized social groups [2, 7].

9.7. Towards Inclusive and Accountable Educational Governance

Effective gender inclusion in education ultimately depends

on the alignment between policy intent and institutional practice. Participatory governance structures, faculty training, gender audits, and continuous monitoring can enhance institutional accountability. By embedding gender inclusion within the everyday functioning of educational institutions, policy frameworks can move closer to realizing their transformative potential. To summarise, India's policy frameworks for gender inclusion in education reflect significant progress in recognizing gender inequality as a structural issue. However, sustained commitment, institutional reform, and gender-transformative strategies are essential to ensure that educational spaces become genuinely inclusive and equitable.

10. Conclusion

Gender inclusion in Indian educational spaces remains a critical yet unfinished project. While significant progress has been achieved in expanding access to education for girls and women through sustained policy interventions, a sociological analysis reveals that formal equality has not translated into substantive inclusion. Educational institutions continue to function as gendered spaces where cultural norms, institutional practices, and power relations shape unequal experiences and outcomes. Issues related to curriculum representation, pedagogical practices, leadership participation, safety, and autonomy persist across different levels of education.

This paper has argued that gender inclusion cannot be assessed solely through enrolment statistics or policy declarations. Instead, it requires attention to everyday institutional practices and the broader social structures in which educational institutions are embedded. Feminist and sociological perspectives highlight that gender inequality in education is deeply interconnected with caste, class, and regional disparities, making intersectional approaches essential for meaningful reform. From a policy perspective, the findings suggest the need to move beyond welfare-oriented and protectionist frameworks towards gender-transformative educational policies. Such policies must actively challenge patriarchal norms, promote gender-sensitive curricula and pedagogy, ensure equitable representation in leadership and decision-making, and strengthen institutional mechanisms for addressing discrimination and harassment. Faculty training, participatory governance, and accountability structures are crucial for translating policy intent into institutional practice. In conclusion, achieving genuine gender inclusion in Indian education requires a sustained commitment to institutional transformation alongside policy reform. By reimagining educational spaces as inclusive, democratic, and reflexive institutions, education can more effectively serve as a catalyst for gender justice and broader social change.

Abbreviations

UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and

	Cultural Organization
NFHS	National Family Health Survey
NEP	National Educational Policy

Author Contributions

Neela Bai. R.: Conceptualization, Resources

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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