

GENDER DISPARITIES IN INDIAN EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS OF ACCESS, PARTICIPATION, AND EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

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Abstract—Education serves as a powerful instrument for social transformation, economic development, and individual empowerment. Despite considerable progress in educational access and enrolment, gender disparities continue to influence educational outcomes in India. Girls often encounter multiple barriers, including poverty, social norms, early marriage, inadequate educational infrastructure, and unequal household responsibilities, which restrict their opportunities for learning and skill development. These challenges contribute to lower educational attainment and limit women's participation in economic and social activities.

The present study examines the nature and extent of gender disparities in Indian education by analysing literacy levels, enrolment patterns, educational attainment, and factors affecting access to quality education. The study also evaluates the role of government initiatives and policy interventions aimed at promoting gender equality in education. Using secondary data from government reports, educational surveys, and scholarly literature, the research explores the relationship between educational opportunities and women's empowerment.

The findings indicate that although significant improvements have been achieved in female enrolment and literacy, notable inequalities persist across regions, socio-economic groups, and educational levels. Addressing these disparities requires sustained policy support, community participation, improved educational infrastructure, and greater awareness regarding the importance of girls' education. Ensuring equal educational opportunities for all genders is essential for achieving inclusive growth, social justice, and sustainable national development.

Keywords: Gender Disparity, Education, Literacy, Women Empowerment, Educational Equality.

Introduction

Education is widely recognized as one of the most powerful tools for promoting social justice, economic progress, and human development. It enhances individual capabilities, expands opportunities, and contributes to the overall well-being of society. In a developing country like India, education plays a crucial role in reducing poverty, improving living standards, and fostering inclusive growth. However, despite remarkable progress in expanding educational access over the past few decades, gender disparities continue to remain a significant challenge within the Indian education system.

Gender disparity in education refers to unequal opportunities, participation, and outcomes experienced by individuals based on their gender. Although India has achieved substantial improvements in literacy rates and school enrolment, girls and women continue to face various obstacles that limit their educational attainment. These barriers arise from a combination of social, cultural, economic, and institutional factors. Traditional gender norms, early marriage, poverty, household responsibilities, safety concerns, and inadequate educational facilities often discourage girls from pursuing education beyond the primary level.

The issue of gender inequality in education is particularly evident in rural and economically disadvantaged regions. In many communities, families prioritize the education of boys over girls due to the belief that sons are future breadwinners while daughters are expected to assume domestic roles. Consequently, girls are more likely to experience school dropout, irregular attendance, and limited access to higher education. Such inequalities not only affect the lives of individual women but also hinder national development by restricting the productive potential of nearly half of the population.

Over the years, the Government of India has introduced several initiatives to promote educational equality and improve female participation in schooling. Programmes such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, and the National Education Policy 2020 have focused on increasing enrolment, reducing dropout rates, and ensuring inclusive educational opportunities for girls. These interventions have contributed to a gradual improvement in female literacy and educational participation. Nevertheless, significant disparities continue to exist across regions, socio-economic groups, and levels of education.

Gender equality in education is not merely a matter of fairness; it is also a prerequisite for sustainable development and social empowerment. Educated women are more likely to participate in the workforce, make informed health decisions, contribute to family welfare, and support the education of future generations. Therefore, achieving gender parity in education can generate long-term benefits for economic growth, social stability, and national progress.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the nature and extent of gender disparities in Indian education. It explores the key factors contributing to educational inequality, analyses recent trends in literacy and enrolment, and evaluates the effectiveness of policy measures aimed at promoting gender equality. By understanding the underlying causes and consequences of educational disparities, the study aims to provide insights that can support the development of more inclusive and equitable educational policies in India.

Review of Literature

The issue of gender disparity in education has been extensively examined by researchers, international organizations, and policymakers. While existing studies generally agree that educational opportunities for girls have improved over time, there is considerable debate regarding the effectiveness of current interventions in eliminating structural inequalities. A critical examination of the literature reveals that gender disparities persist due to the interaction of economic, social, cultural, and institutional factors.

Chauhan (2024) argues that despite increased educational access, girls continue to face significant disadvantages in enrolment, retention, and academic achievement, particularly in rural areas. While the study effectively highlights the role of poverty and inadequate infrastructure, it primarily focuses on access-related barriers and pays limited attention to the quality of education and learning outcomes. This suggests that future research should move beyond enrolment statistics and examine whether girls receive educational experiences comparable to those of boys.

The World Bank (2023) identifies poverty as a major determinant of educational inequality, emphasizing that economic deprivation disproportionately affects girls' educational participation. Although the report provides valuable global evidence, its broad international perspective may not fully capture the complex socio-cultural realities of India. Economic hardship undoubtedly restricts educational opportunities, but cultural norms and gender expectations often reinforce educational exclusion even when financial barriers are reduced.

Research on gender equality in higher education reveals another dimension of disparity. Casad et al. (2020) observe that women's participation in higher education has increased considerably; however, their representation in STEM disciplines remains disproportionately low. The study argues that institutional biases, stereotypes, and limited mentoring opportunities continue to discourage women from pursuing scientific careers. This finding suggests that quantitative improvements in enrolment do not automatically translate into substantive gender equality. Educational systems must therefore address hidden barriers that influence career choices and professional advancement.

Similarly, Rosa and Clavero (2022) emphasize the importance of institutional reforms in promoting gender equality within higher education. Their research demonstrates that universities implementing gender-sensitive policies achieve better outcomes in female participation and leadership representation. However, the effectiveness of such reforms often depends on institutional commitment and resource availability. This indicates that policy frameworks alone are insufficient unless supported by continuous monitoring and implementation mechanisms.

The relationship between gender equality and economic development has been extensively discussed by Klasen and Lamanna (2008). Their analysis demonstrates that educational and employment inequalities reduce economic growth by limiting the productive potential of women. While the study successfully establishes the economic costs of gender inequality, it focuses primarily on macroeconomic outcomes. Less attention is given to the social consequences, such as reduced empowerment, health inequalities, and intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. Therefore, educational inequality should be viewed not only as an economic issue but also as a broader developmental challenge.

Several studies highlight the influence of socio-cultural norms on educational outcomes. Kapur (2019) argues that parental attitudes, traditional gender roles, and societal expectations significantly affect girls' educational attainment. This

perspective is particularly relevant in the Indian context, where educational decisions are often shaped by family and community values. However, cultural explanations alone may oversimplify the issue because educational inequalities frequently emerge from the combined effects of social norms, economic conditions, and institutional limitations.

Recent studies on marginalized communities further demonstrate that gender inequality intersects with other forms of social disadvantage. Chari and Rayaprol (2023) show that caste, class, and regional disparities often intensify educational barriers for girls. Their findings challenge the assumption that gender is an isolated variable and suggest that educational policies must adopt an intersectional approach to address multiple forms of exclusion simultaneously.

A critical assessment of government initiatives reveals mixed outcomes. Programmes such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and the National Education Policy 2020 have contributed to increased enrolment and awareness regarding girls' education. Nevertheless, implementation gaps, regional inequalities, and resource constraints continue to limit their effectiveness. The literature suggests that policy success depends not only on programme design but also on local governance, community participation, and institutional accountability.

Overall, the existing literature demonstrates that gender disparities in education cannot be explained by a single factor. Instead, they result from the complex interaction of economic, cultural, social, and institutional influences. While significant progress has been made in improving access to education, achieving genuine educational equality requires greater attention to retention, quality of learning, career opportunities, and structural barriers that continue to disadvantage girls and women. This study seeks to contribute to the literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of these interconnected factors within the Indian educational context.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this research study is to analyze the existing gender disparities in the Indian education system by exploring the following aspects:

1. To examine the extent of gender disparities in educational access, enrolment, literacy, retention, and completion rates across different levels of education in India.
2. To analyze the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors that contribute to gender inequality in the Indian education system.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of government policies and educational programmes aimed at promoting gender equality and enhancing girls' educational participation.
4. To assess the impact of educational attainment on women's empowerment, economic independence, social mobility, and participation in decision-making processes.
5. To suggest policy measures and strategic interventions for reducing gender disparities and ensuring inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all genders in India.

Conceptual Framework and Research Design

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is based on the premise that gender disparities in education are influenced by a combination of socio-economic, cultural, institutional, and policy-related factors. Educational outcomes for boys and girls are not determined solely by access to schools but are shaped by broader social and economic conditions that affect learning opportunities and academic achievement.

In this framework, **gender disparity in education** serves as the dependent variable, measured through indicators such as literacy rates, enrolment levels, school retention, educational attainment, and participation in higher education. The independent variables include socio-economic status, parental education, household income, cultural attitudes toward girls' education, educational infrastructure, government support programmes, and regional development levels.

The framework assumes that poverty, traditional gender norms, early marriage, limited access to educational resources, and inadequate infrastructure negatively affect girls' educational participation and achievement. Conversely, supportive family environments, gender-sensitive policies, scholarship programmes, and improved educational facilities are expected to enhance educational opportunities and reduce gender inequality. The interaction among these factors ultimately influences the level of educational inclusion and women's empowerment in society.

The study further recognizes that educational attainment contributes to broader developmental outcomes such as economic independence, social mobility, employment opportunities, and participation in decision-making processes. Thus, reducing gender disparities in education is viewed as an essential pathway toward achieving social equity and sustainable development.

Research Design

The present study adopts a **descriptive and analytical research design** to examine gender disparities in Indian education. The descriptive component focuses on identifying the nature and extent of gender inequality in educational participation and achievement, while the analytical component investigates the factors responsible for such disparities and evaluates the effectiveness of policy interventions.

The study is primarily based on **secondary data** collected from reliable sources, including reports published by the Ministry of Education, Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+), All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), National Statistical Office (NSO), UNESCO, World Bank, and other scholarly publications. These sources provide comprehensive information on literacy rates, enrolment trends, dropout rates, gender parity indicators, and educational attainment.

Both **quantitative and qualitative approaches** are employed in the analysis. Quantitative analysis is used to examine trends and patterns in educational indicators, while qualitative analysis helps interpret the social, cultural, and institutional factors influencing gender inequality. The study also utilizes comparative analysis to assess differences across educational levels, socio-economic groups, and geographical regions.

The scope of the research covers primary, secondary, and higher education in India, with particular emphasis on understanding barriers faced by girls and women in accessing quality education. Through this approach, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of gender disparities in education and offer evidence-based recommendations for promoting educational equality and women's empowerment.

Data and Methods

Data Sources

The present study is based entirely on **secondary data** collected from various reliable national and international sources. Data were obtained from publications and reports issued by the Ministry of Education, Government of India, the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+), the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), the National Statistical Office (NSO), UNESCO, the World Bank, and other scholarly journals and research reports. These sources provide comprehensive information on literacy rates, enrolment patterns, dropout rates, Gender Parity Index (GPI), educational attainment, and participation in higher education.

The study utilizes the most recent available data to assess the current status of gender equality in education and identify trends across different educational levels. Relevant literature, policy documents, government schemes, and academic publications were also reviewed to understand the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors influencing educational disparities.

Methodology

The study adopts a **descriptive and analytical research methodology** to examine gender disparities in the Indian education system. The descriptive approach is used to present the existing status of educational participation among males and females, while the analytical approach helps identify the underlying causes and consequences of gender inequality.

Both **quantitative and qualitative methods** have been employed in the analysis. Quantitative analysis focuses on educational indicators such as literacy rates, enrolment ratios, Gender Parity Index, dropout rates, and higher education participation. Qualitative analysis is used to interpret the influence of social norms, cultural practices, economic conditions, and policy interventions on educational outcomes.

Scope of the Study

The study focuses on gender disparities in primary, secondary, and higher education in India. It examines educational access, participation, retention, literacy, and attainment among males and females. Special attention is given to socio-economic and cultural barriers that affect girls' educational opportunities and their implications for women's empowerment and national development.

Limitations of the Study

The study relies exclusively on secondary data; therefore, its findings are dependent on the accuracy and availability of published sources. Variations in data collection methods across different agencies may influence comparability. Furthermore, the study does not include primary survey data, which may limit detailed examination of region-specific experiences and perceptions regarding gender inequality in education.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Literacy and Educational Attainment

India has witnessed significant progress in literacy over the last few decades, yet gender differences remain evident. According to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (2024), the overall literacy rate in India has crossed 77 percent, with male literacy continuing to exceed female literacy. While the gap has narrowed compared to previous decades, women in several rural and economically weaker regions still experience lower literacy levels due to limited educational opportunities and social constraints.

The improvement in female literacy reflects the positive impact of government initiatives such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, and the National Education Policy 2020. However, the persistence of gender gaps indicates that educational access alone is insufficient; retention, quality of learning, and completion rates must also be addressed.

School Enrolment and Gender Participation

Data from the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+, 2023–24) indicate that gender parity in school enrolment has improved considerably at the primary and upper-primary levels. The Gender Parity Index (GPI), which measures the ratio of female to male enrolment, has approached parity in many states. This trend demonstrates increasing acceptance of girls' education and the effectiveness of awareness campaigns and financial support schemes.

Despite these achievements, dropout rates among girls tend to increase at the secondary and higher-secondary levels. Factors such as household responsibilities, financial hardship, safety concerns, and early marriage continue to affect educational continuity. These challenges are particularly pronounced in rural and socially disadvantaged communities.

Higher Education Trends

The All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE 2021–22) reports a steady increase in female participation in higher education. Women now account for nearly half of total enrolment in higher educational institutions, reflecting substantial progress toward educational inclusion. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for women has shown consistent improvement and, in some categories, has exceeded that of men.

This positive trend suggests that policy measures promoting women's education have yielded encouraging results. Nevertheless, disparities remain in professional and technical disciplines, particularly in engineering, technology, and certain STEM fields, where male enrolment continues to dominate. Greater emphasis on career guidance, scholarships, and mentorship programmes is required to encourage female participation in these sectors.

Regional and Socio-Economic Disparities

Educational outcomes vary significantly across states and socio-economic groups. States such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu have achieved relatively high literacy rates and gender parity through sustained investment in education and social welfare programmes. In contrast, economically disadvantaged regions continue to struggle with lower female literacy and higher dropout rates.

Socio-economic status remains a critical determinant of educational attainment. Children from low-income households often face barriers related to affordability, transportation, digital access, and learning resources. Girls in such households are more vulnerable to educational exclusion due to prevailing social norms and domestic responsibilities.

Interpretation

The analysis indicates that India has made considerable progress in reducing gender disparities in education. Increased enrolment, improved literacy levels, and greater female participation in higher education demonstrate the success of various policy interventions. However, persistent inequalities across regions, income groups, and educational stages highlight the need for targeted strategies. Strengthening educational infrastructure, expanding financial support, promoting gender-sensitive learning environments, and addressing socio-cultural barriers are essential for achieving complete gender parity in education and advancing women's empowerment.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of gender disparities in Indian education reveals both encouraging progress and persistent challenges. Over the past two decades, India has achieved notable improvements in educational access, literacy rates, and enrolment levels among girls. Government interventions, increased social awareness, and improvements in educational infrastructure have contributed significantly to narrowing the gender gap. However, disparities continue to exist across educational levels, socio-economic groups, and geographical regions.

Improvement in Female Literacy and Enrolment

One of the major findings of the study is the steady growth in female literacy and school enrolment. Educational policies promoting universal education have increased participation among girls at the primary and upper-primary levels. The Gender Parity Index has shown considerable improvement, indicating that the difference between male and female enrolment has reduced substantially in many states. This trend reflects changing societal attitudes toward girls' education and greater recognition of its importance for social and economic development.

Despite these gains, female literacy remains lower than male literacy in several regions. The gap is particularly visible in rural and economically disadvantaged areas where access to quality education remains limited. The findings suggest that literacy improvement alone cannot guarantee educational equality unless accompanied by better learning outcomes and educational continuity.

Persistence of Dropout Rates among Girls

The study finds that dropout rates among girls continue to rise at the secondary and higher-secondary levels. Although enrolment at the elementary stage has improved considerably, many girls discontinue their education before completing higher levels of schooling. Economic hardship, domestic responsibilities, lack of transportation facilities, safety concerns, and early marriage are among the primary factors contributing to this trend.

The findings indicate that families facing financial constraints often prioritize the education of male children, considering them future earners. Consequently, girls are more likely to leave school to assist with household work or caregiving responsibilities. This pattern demonstrates that gender inequality in education is closely linked to broader socio-economic conditions and cultural expectations.

Socio-Cultural Barriers and Gender Norms

The analysis highlights the continuing influence of traditional gender norms on educational opportunities. In many communities, societal expectations encourage girls to focus on domestic roles rather than academic achievement and career development. Such attitudes affect parental investment in girls' education and limit their access to advanced learning opportunities.

The findings also reveal that gender stereotypes continue to influence subject selection and career aspirations. Female students remain underrepresented in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines despite increasing participation in higher education. This imbalance reflects the need for greater encouragement, mentorship, and career guidance for young women.

Regional Variations in Educational Achievement

Another significant finding is the existence of substantial regional disparities. States with stronger educational infrastructure, better governance, and higher social development indicators generally report higher levels of female literacy and educational participation. In contrast, economically weaker states continue to face challenges related to school accessibility, resource availability, and educational quality.

The analysis suggests that state-specific strategies are necessary to address local challenges effectively. Uniform national policies may not adequately address the diverse social and economic realities experienced across different regions of India.

Impact of Government Initiatives

The study finds that government programmes have played a crucial role in promoting educational inclusion. Initiatives such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, Samagra Shiksha, and the National Education Policy 2020 have contributed to increased awareness and improved educational opportunities for girls. Scholarship schemes, free textbooks, school meal programmes, and financial incentives have helped reduce barriers to participation.

However, the effectiveness of these initiatives varies across regions due to differences in implementation, monitoring, and resource allocation. The findings indicate that policy success depends not only on programme design but also on local administrative capacity and community involvement.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that gender disparity in Indian education is a multidimensional issue shaped by economic, cultural, institutional, and social factors. While India has made remarkable progress in expanding educational access for girls, achieving true gender equality requires addressing deeper structural barriers. Educational policies should focus not only on enrolment but also on retention, learning quality, digital inclusion, and career development opportunities.

The study further suggests that empowering girls through education generates broader developmental benefits, including improved health outcomes, reduced poverty, increased workforce participation, and enhanced social mobility. Therefore, investments in girls' education should be viewed as investments in national development. Strengthening educational infrastructure, promoting gender-sensitive teaching practices, supporting disadvantaged families, and challenging discriminatory social norms are essential for ensuring that every child receives equal educational opportunities regardless of gender.

Overall, the findings confirm that although significant progress has been achieved, sustained efforts are required to eliminate remaining disparities and create a more inclusive and equitable educational system in India.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following policy recommendations are proposed to reduce gender disparities and promote educational equality in India:

1. **Strengthen Educational Infrastructure:** Improve the availability of schools, transportation facilities, separate sanitation facilities for girls, and digital learning resources, particularly in rural and underserved areas.
2. **Expand Financial Support Mechanisms:** Increase scholarships, fee waivers, conditional cash transfers, and educational incentives for girls from economically disadvantaged households to reduce financial barriers to education.
3. **Promote Gender-Sensitive Education:** Integrate gender equality concepts into school curricula and teacher training programmes to challenge stereotypes and encourage inclusive learning environments.
4. **Reduce School Dropout Rates:** Implement targeted interventions to address factors such as child marriage, domestic responsibilities, and safety concerns that contribute to girls leaving school prematurely.
5. **Encourage Female Participation in STEM Education:** Provide mentorship programmes, career counselling, scholarships, and awareness campaigns to increase girls' participation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines.
6. **Enhance Community Awareness:** Conduct awareness programmes involving parents, local leaders, and community organizations to emphasize the social and economic benefits of educating girls.
7. **Strengthen Monitoring and Evaluation Systems:** Establish robust mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of educational policies and ensure that resources are efficiently utilized to achieve gender equity goals.
8. **Support Digital Inclusion:** Expand access to affordable internet connectivity, digital devices, and technology-based learning opportunities for girls to reduce the digital gender divide.
9. **Focus on Regional Disparities:** Develop state-specific and district-specific educational strategies that address local challenges and socio-cultural barriers affecting girls' education.
10. **Promote Women's Empowerment through Education:** Link educational programmes with skill development, entrepreneurship training, and employment opportunities to enhance women's economic independence and social participation.

The successful implementation of these recommendations will contribute to achieving gender parity in education, strengthening women's empowerment, and supporting India's broader goals of inclusive growth, social justice, and sustainable development.

Conclusion

Education is a fundamental instrument for achieving social justice, economic progress, and human development. The present study examined the extent and nature of gender disparities in Indian education and highlighted the factors influencing unequal educational opportunities for boys and girls. The analysis reveals that India has made significant progress in improving female literacy, increasing school enrolment, and expanding access to higher education. Government initiatives, educational reforms, and growing social awareness have contributed to narrowing the gender gap across several educational indicators.

Despite these achievements, gender inequality continues to persist in various forms. Girls, particularly those from rural, economically weaker, and socially marginalized communities, continue to face barriers such as poverty, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, inadequate infrastructure, and cultural stereotypes. These challenges often result in lower educational attainment, higher dropout rates, and reduced participation in professional and technical fields. Regional disparities further complicate the situation, indicating that progress has not been uniform across the country.

The findings of the study demonstrate that achieving gender equality in education requires more than increasing enrolment rates. Equal access must be complemented by quality learning opportunities, safe educational environments, effective retention strategies, and opportunities for career advancement. Education has the potential to transform the lives of women by enhancing their economic independence, decision-making capacity, and social status. Therefore, promoting educational equality is not only a matter of human rights but also a strategic investment in national development.

In conclusion, while India has achieved substantial progress toward educational inclusion, sustained efforts are required to eliminate remaining disparities. A collaborative approach involving governments, educational institutions, communities, civil society organizations, and families is essential for creating an educational system that provides equal opportunities for all learners regardless of gender. Such efforts will contribute significantly to building an inclusive, equitable, and sustainable society.

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