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Women's Education and Empowerment in India: Progress, Challenges, and Future Prospects

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Abstract:

Women's education is central to social justice, economic development, and democratic participation in India. Over recent decades, the country has achieved substantial progress in female enrolment, literacy, retention, and access to higher education through constitutional guarantees, public programmes, scholarships, and changing social attitudes. Education has strengthened women's awareness of rights, employability, decision-making capacity, health outcomes, and participation in community and national development. Significant inequalities persist across rural and urban areas, social groups, income levels, regions, and stages of education. Poverty, early marriage, gender-based violence, safety concerns, inadequate sanitation, digital exclusion, domestic responsibilities, and discriminatory norms continue to restrict educational opportunities and empowerment. The major achievements, continuing barriers, and the relationship between education and women's agency in India. It argues that future progress requires coordinated action by government, educational institutions, families, communities, and civil society to ensure equitable, safe, inclusive, and employment-oriented learning opportunities for every Indian woman.

Keywords: Women's education; Women's empowerment; Gender equality; Educational inequality; India



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1. Introduction

Education has played a central role in the social, economic and political transformation of women in India. For generations, many Indian women were denied formal learning because of patriarchal traditions, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, poverty and restrictions on their mobility. Although these barriers have not disappeared completely, India has made substantial progress in expanding girls' access to primary, secondary and higher education. The growth of educational institutions, constitutional guarantees, social reform movements, welfare programmes and changing family attitudes has created new opportunities for women to study and participate in public life. The importance of women's education extends far beyond individual academic achievement. An educated woman is generally better positioned to understand her legal rights, make informed health decisions, obtain paid employment, participate in household decision-making and support the education of the next generation. Female education is therefore connected with improvements in health, fertility choices, children's well-being and broader social development (Borkotoky & Unisa, 2015; Stromquist, 2015). India's recent educational data demonstrate meaningful progress. Female participation has increased at school and university levels, and women now constitute a significant proportion of students in science and several professional fields. Nevertheless, educational opportunities remain unequal across regions, income groups, castes, tribes, religious communities, disability categories and rural-urban locations. Gender stereotypes, unsafe travel, digital inequality, unpaid care work and limited employment opportunities continue to influence women's educational choices and outcomes (Chanana, 2007; Sundaram & Vanneman, 2008).

Women's education refers to women's equitable access to meaningful, safe and high-quality learning throughout their lives. It includes literacy, school education, higher education, vocational training, professional education, digital literacy and adult learning. Genuine educational equality means more than placing girls in classrooms. It also requires regular attendance, successful completion, freedom to select subjects and the ability to use acquired knowledge in everyday life. Women's

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empowerment is the process through which women gain the resources, confidence, agency and institutional support required to make important decisions concerning their own lives. Kabeer (2005) explains empowerment through the interconnected dimensions of resources, agency and achievements. Education contributes to these dimensions by increasing knowledge, strengthening confidence and improving women's capacity to challenge unequal social relations. Education becomes truly empowering only when women are able to translate qualifications into employment, independent decision-making, leadership and freedom from violence and discrimination (Bhuwania et al., 2024; Stromquist, 2015).

1.2 Objectives

1. To the historical development of women's education in India from the ancient period to the post-independence era.
2. To the constitutional provisions, laws and government institutions supporting women's education, equality, dignity and safety.
3. To evaluate the progress achieved in female literacy, educational enrolment and women's participation in higher, professional and technical education.

2. Historical Development of Women's Education in India

2.1 Women's Education in Ancient and Medieval India

The history of women's education in India has not followed a simple or uniform path. Some early Vedic traditions refer to learned women who participated in philosophical and religious discussions. Women such as Gargi and Maitreyi are frequently presented as examples of intellectual participation during the period. However, these examples should not be interpreted as evidence of universal educational equality. Access to learning depended strongly on social position, family background, caste and prevailing religious customs. During later periods, educational opportunities for women became increasingly restricted. The growing influence of patriarchal family structures, child marriage, caste-based restrictions and the expectation that women should remain confined to domestic responsibilities reduced their access to formal learning. Education was generally available to a small number of women from royal, aristocratic, scholarly or religious families. Ordinary women usually acquired practical knowledge through family and community traditions rather than organised institutions (Kumari, 2024).

Conditions remained similarly unequal during much of the medieval period. Some royal and elite women received instruction in languages, literature, religion, music, administration and the arts, but formal education for the wider female population was rare. Practices such as purdah, early marriage and limitations on women's movement made it difficult for girls to attend educational institutions. Nevertheless, women continued to contribute to cultural and spiritual life through oral traditions, devotional movements, poetry and community knowledge. Thus, women were never completely absent from intellectual activity, even when formal institutions excluded them.

2.2 Social Reform Movements during the Colonial Period

The colonial period introduced a significant turning point in the history of women's education. Christian missionaries, Indian reformers, charitable organisations and sections of the colonial administration began establishing schools for girls. Their efforts created new spaces for female literacy, although the purpose and content of women's education remained subjects of social debate. Missionary educational activity was particularly important in regions where competition among religious and social organisations encouraged the establishment of additional schools for girls (Lankina & Getachew, 2013).

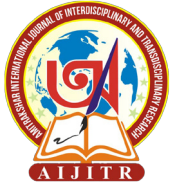
Indian reformers challenged customs that prevented women from obtaining education. Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule promoted girls' education and worked among socially disadvantaged communities. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar advocated female education and widow remarriage, while social thinkers such as Pandita Ramabai and Begum Rokeya argued that education was essential for women's dignity and independence. These reformers faced considerable resistance because many families believed that educated women would challenge domestic authority or abandon traditional responsibilities.

Progress remained slow because girls were often married at an early age, required to perform household work or prevented from travelling to school. There was also a shortage of female teachers, separate schools, secure transportation and suitable accommodation. To overcome these problems, reformers and educational organisations introduced scholarships, female teacher training, boarding facilities and home-based instruction.

The curriculum provided to girls was frequently different from that provided to boys. Girls were often taught basic literacy, sewing, household management, hygiene and moral instruction so that they could become more capable wives and mothers. Consequently, colonial education expanded women's literacy but did not always question the unequal distribution of power between men and women. Even so, the period helped establish the principle that women possessed an intellectual and social right to education (Kumari, 2024).

2.3 Development after Independence

India's independence in 1947 transformed women's education from a limited reformist demand into a constitutional and developmental responsibility. The Constitution guaranteed equality, prohibited sex-based discrimination and directed the state to expand educational opportunities. Successive governments established schools, colleges and universities while introducing



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scholarships, hostels, adult literacy programmes and incentives intended to increase girls' participation.

The expansion of elementary education, particularly through programmes such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, brought a growing number of girls into school. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 created a legally enforceable framework for the education of children between six and fourteen years of age. Later initiatives, including Samagra Shiksha and the National Education Policy 2020, placed greater emphasis on inclusion, educational quality, vocational learning and support for socially and economically disadvantaged groups (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020; Government of India, Ministry of Law and Justice, 2009).

Post-independence development has therefore produced substantial gains, but the benefits have not been evenly distributed. Poverty, school quality, caste inequalities, regional disparities and gendered household responsibilities continue to affect girls' attendance and completion rates. The history of women's education after independence is consequently a story of both impressive expansion and unfinished social transformation (Drèze & Kingdon, 2001; Kingdon, 2007).

3. Constitutional and Legal Provisions

3.1 Constitutional Right to Equality and Education

The Constitution of India provides the basic legal foundation for women's educational equality and empowerment. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds that include sex, while Article 15(3) permits the state to make special provisions for women and children. This provision recognises that formal equality may not be enough when women have experienced long-standing social and educational disadvantages.

Article 16 guarantees equality of opportunity in public employment. This protection is important because education becomes more empowering when women can use their qualifications to enter public services and other occupations without sex-based discrimination. Article 21A establishes free and compulsory education as a fundamental right for children between six and fourteen years of age. Although it applies to all children, it has special importance for girls who might otherwise be withdrawn from school because of poverty, domestic work or discriminatory family priorities.

The Directive Principles of State Policy further strengthen the constitutional vision of gender justice. Article 39 directs the state to ensure that men and women have an adequate means of livelihood and receive equal pay for equal work. Article 42 provides for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief. Article 46 promotes the educational and economic interests of weaker sections. In addition, Article 51A(e) identifies the renunciation of practices derogatory to the dignity of women as a fundamental duty of citizens (Government of India, Ministry of Law and Justice, 2024).

3.2 Laws Supporting Women's Rights and Safety

Several laws support women's education indirectly by addressing the conditions that prevent girls and women from studying. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 requires the provision of free elementary education and establishes responsibilities for governments, schools and local authorities. The law is especially relevant for girls from economically disadvantaged families because it reduces direct educational costs and treats elementary education as an enforceable right rather than a charitable service (Government of India, Ministry of Law and Justice, 2009).

The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 is also important because early marriage commonly interrupts girls' education and exposes them to premature domestic and reproductive responsibilities. By prohibiting child marriage and providing mechanisms for legal intervention, the Act helps protect the period during which girls should remain in education (Government of India, Ministry of Law and Justice, 2006).

The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 recognises physical, emotional, verbal, sexual and economic abuse within domestic relationships. Protection from violence is essential for educational continuity because women and girls living under abusive conditions may be prevented from attending school, training or employment (Government of India, Ministry of Law and Justice, 2005).

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013 provides a framework for preventing and addressing sexual harassment. Its principles are relevant to universities, training institutions and workplaces because women's participation cannot be considered equal when educational or professional environments are unsafe or intimidating (Government of India, Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2013). The practical value of these laws depends on awareness, reporting mechanisms, institutional accountability and timely enforcement. Legal rights alone cannot empower women when families, schools, police authorities or employers fail to implement them.

3.3 Role of Government Institutions

Government institutions translate constitutional commitments and laws into educational policies and programmes. The Ministry of Education develops national policies, administers major educational schemes and collects data through systems such as UDISE+ and the All India Survey on Higher Education. State education departments, district administrations and local authorities are responsible for establishing schools, appointing teachers, maintaining infrastructure and implementing incentives for girls.



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The University Grants Commission contributes to equality in higher education through regulations, institutional guidelines, scholarships and measures intended to prevent discrimination and harassment. Universities and colleges are expected to establish internal complaint mechanisms and create safer learning environments for women.

The Ministry of Women and Child Development, the National Commission for Women, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights and state-level commissions also contribute through legal awareness, policy advice, grievance redressal and the protection of women and children. However, coordination among education departments, social-welfare agencies, law-enforcement authorities and local communities remains essential. A scholarship may help a girl enrol, but safe transport, sanitation, supportive teachers and family acceptance may determine whether she can remain in education.

4. Progress in Women's Education

4.1 Improvement in Female Literacy

India has achieved a major increase in female literacy since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Census data show that the female literacy rate increased from 53.67 per cent in 2001 to 65.46 per cent in 2011. The narrowing of the male–female literacy gap indicates that public investment, social awareness and the expansion of schooling have produced positive results. Adult literacy initiatives and increasing parental acceptance of girls' education have also contributed to this improvement (Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2024).

National averages conceal important disparities. Women in rural areas, poorer households and socially disadvantaged communities are more likely to experience illiteracy or limited years of schooling. Literacy must also be understood as more than the ability to sign a name. Women require functional, financial, legal and digital literacy to communicate effectively, use public services, manage money and participate in contemporary economic life (Sundaram & Vanneman, 2008).

4.2 Increase in School and Higher-Education Enrolment

Girls' participation in school education has expanded considerably. UDISE+ data for 2021–22 recorded more than 122.9 million girls enrolled from the primary to higher-secondary levels. The Gender Parity Index was one or higher at major levels of school education, indicating that girls' enrolment had reached or exceeded that of boys in several categories (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2022).

Higher education has also witnessed notable growth. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education 2021–22, female enrolment reached approximately 20.7 million, compared with about 15.7 million in 2014–15. The female gross enrolment ratio increased to 28.5, and the Gender Parity Index reached 1.01. Female enrolment in doctoral programmes also increased substantially during this period (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2024).

Enrolment, nevertheless, should not be treated as the only measure of success. Attendance, learning quality, completion, transition to employment and freedom of subject selection are equally important. Girls may enrol in school but discontinue their education because of financial hardship, unsafe transport, menstruation-related difficulties, household work, marriage or examination pressure.

4.3 Growing Participation in Professional and Technical Education

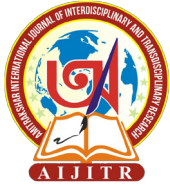
Women's participation in science, medicine, management, law and other professional programmes has increased. In 2021–22, women constituted more than half of enrolment in science programmes overall, and female participation was particularly strong in postgraduate science and medical education. These trends challenge the older belief that women are unsuitable for scientific or professional careers (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2024).

Nevertheless, gender segregation by discipline remains visible. Women are still underrepresented in many engineering and technology programmes. AISHE data for undergraduate engineering and technology recorded approximately 1.14 million women compared with about 2.77 million men, meaning that women represented less than one-third of enrolment in this broad field. Women are also more heavily concentrated in subjects traditionally associated with teaching, care, humanities and health services (Chanana, 2007; Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2024).

Subject choice is influenced not only by personal interest but also by school preparation, social stereotypes, career counselling, family expectations, institutional culture and anticipated workplace conditions. Expanding women's presence in technical education therefore requires scholarships, mentoring, exposure to female role models, safe campuses, stronger mathematics and science preparation and fair recruitment practices. Educational progress becomes genuine empowerment when women can enter diverse fields, complete their studies and build careers that reflect their abilities rather than restrictive gender expectations.

5. Education as a Tool of Women's Empowerment

Education is one of the most powerful means of strengthening women's capabilities, confidence and control over their lives. Empowerment is not limited to obtaining a certificate or entering paid employment; it involves gaining access to resources, developing the ability to make meaningful choices and transforming those choices into desired outcomes. Education contributes to this process by improving knowledge, communication skills, self-respect, mobility and awareness of rights. However,



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education produces the greatest empowerment when it is supported by employment opportunities, social acceptance, personal safety and equal institutional treatment (Kabeer, 2005; UNESCO, 2020).

5.1 Economic Independence and Employment

Education improves women's prospects for economic independence by providing literacy, technical knowledge, professional qualifications and the confidence required to participate in the labour market. Educated women are generally better able to obtain salaried employment, understand financial services, manage enterprises and negotiate wages and working conditions. Research based on Indian labour-market data has shown that education can produce substantial occupational and wage benefits for women, especially when women move from low-paid informal work into skilled and professional employment (Kingdon & Unni, 2001).

Education also changes family expectations. When young women can see a realistic connection between schooling and employment, they and their families are more likely to postpone marriage and invest in additional education or vocational training. Experimental evidence from rural India found that increased awareness of employment opportunities encouraged young women to continue studying, undertake training and delay marriage and childbirth (Jensen, 2012).

Nevertheless, education alone does not guarantee employment. India has experienced the paradox of rising female educational attainment alongside persistently limited female employment. Occupational segregation, inadequate childcare, family restrictions, unsafe transportation and shortages of suitable local jobs can prevent educated women from joining or remaining in the workforce (Chatterjee et al., 2018; Klasen & Pieters, 2015). Therefore, education must be linked with vocational guidance, apprenticeships, digital skills, entrepreneurship support and safe, dignified employment.

5.2 Social Awareness and Decision-Making

Education expands women's social awareness by enabling them to understand laws, public institutions, health information, property rights and protection against discrimination. A woman who can read official documents, access information and communicate confidently is better placed to question unfair treatment and seek assistance. Education can also reduce dependence on family members for information and increase women's participation in decisions concerning healthcare, children's education, household expenditure, marriage and employment.

The relationship between education and decision-making is especially important within patriarchal households. Schooling can strengthen a woman's sense of agency and improve her ability to express preferences, negotiate responsibilities and participate in financial decisions. It can also encourage later marriage, smaller and healthier families and greater investment in children's education. However, empowerment is not automatic. An educated woman may still have limited control over income, movement or reproductive decisions when restrictive gender norms remain dominant. Education must therefore develop critical thinking and knowledge of rights rather than simply preparing women to perform conventional social roles (Kabeer, 2005).

Educated mothers also influence the next generation. Their knowledge of health, nutrition and schooling can improve children's well-being and create more supportive attitudes towards daughters' education. In this way, women's education produces an intergenerational effect by gradually changing how families value girls.

5.3 Political and Community Participation

Education encourages women to participate in public life by improving political awareness, communication ability and familiarity with government procedures. Educated women are more likely to understand electoral processes, evaluate political promises, attend community meetings and communicate their needs to local authorities. They may also participate more confidently in self-help groups, school-management committees, local associations and Panchayati Raj institutions.

Women's political participation is important because women leaders can introduce experiences and priorities that may otherwise remain neglected. Evidence from India's system of reserved local-government positions showed that women representatives influenced public spending and policy choices, particularly in areas relevant to women's everyday lives (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004).

Female leadership can also change the aspirations of younger girls. Girls living in communities repeatedly exposed to women leaders demonstrated higher educational and career aspirations and experienced improvements in educational attainment. Visible female leadership challenges the belief that authority and public decision-making belong only to men (Beaman et al., 2012). Education therefore prepares women not merely to vote but to speak publicly, supervise development programmes, demand accountability and lead community institutions. Political literacy, leadership training and practical knowledge of local administration should consequently form part of women's education and adult-learning programmes.

6. Government Programmes and Initiatives

The Government of India has introduced several programmes to improve girls' survival, enrolment, retention, learning and transition into employment. These interventions combine social-awareness campaigns, school infrastructure, residential education, scholarships, digital learning and vocational training. Their success, however, depends on effective local



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implementation, adequate funding and coordination among education, health, welfare and skill-development departments.

6.1 Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao

Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao was launched in 2015 to address discrimination against girls and promote their survival, protection, education and empowerment. The programme recognizes that educational exclusion begins before a girl enters school, because son preference, gender-biased practices and the lower social valuation of daughters influence how families invest in girls.

The initiative uses public communication, district-level activities and cooperation among government departments to encourage positive attitudes towards daughters. Its educational objectives include improving girls' enrolment, reducing secondary-school dropout and creating awareness of menstrual hygiene and girls' rights. Awareness campaigns must be supported by measurable educational interventions, including counselling, transport, scholarships, local monitoring and action against child marriage. Behavioural messages are most effective when families can see that schools are accessible, safe and capable of producing meaningful opportunities for girls (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2022).

6.2 Samagra Shiksha and Scholarship Schemes

Samagra Shiksha is India's integrated programme for school education, covering education from the foundational stage to senior secondary school. It emphasizes access, equity, inclusion, learning quality, teacher development and school infrastructure. Its provisions for girls include Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas, residential facilities, separate toilets, self-defence training, transport support and interventions for children from disadvantaged communities (Ministry of Education, 2022a).

Scholarship programmes reduce the direct and indirect costs of education. They can help families meet expenses for fees, books, uniforms, transportation, accommodation and digital devices. Merit-cum-means scholarships, pre-matric and post-matric support and incentives for girls from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minority communities and low-income households can improve educational continuity. Yet scholarship systems must remain accessible to students without reliable internet access, bank accounts or extensive documentation.

6.3 Digital Education and Skill-Development Programmes

Digital platforms such as DIKSHA and PM eVIDYA have expanded access to learning materials, teacher support and multimodal education. Digital learning can be particularly useful for women who are unable to attend conventional institutions because of distance, disability, employment or care responsibilities. Nevertheless, digital education can reproduce inequality when women lack smartphones, affordable data, electricity, digital skills or freedom to use devices.

Skill-development programmes such as the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana provide short-term, industry-oriented training and certification. Such programmes can support women's transition from education to employment when courses are connected with local demand, recognized qualifications, placement assistance and entrepreneurship support. Training centres should provide safe transport, flexible schedules, childcare and access to non-traditional occupations rather than concentrating women in a narrow range of low-paid trades (Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2024).

7. Major Challenges

India has made significant progress in girls' enrolment, but enrolment does not necessarily ensure regular attendance, meaningful learning or completion of secondary and higher education. Girls' educational journeys are influenced by interconnected economic, cultural and institutional barriers. These disadvantages become more serious during adolescence, when household responsibilities, safety concerns, marriage pressure and restrictions on mobility often increase.

7.1 Poverty and Gender Discrimination

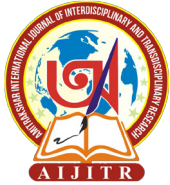
Poverty affects the education of both boys and girls, but its consequences are often gendered. When families cannot afford the full cost of schooling, they may give preference to sons because sons are expected to support parents financially, while daughters are expected to marry and join another household. Even when schooling is officially free, families must bear expenses for transportation, uniforms, books, private tuition, digital devices and examination preparation.

Gender discrimination also influences the type and quality of education provided to girls. Families may invest less in daughters' education, direct them towards nearby or lower-cost institutions, or discourage them from studying subjects believed to be unsuitable for women. Indian evidence indicates that household educational expenditure can remain unequal even when girls are enrolled in school (Azam & Kingdon, 2013).

The disadvantages associated with gender are intensified by caste, tribe, religion, disability and location. Although inequalities have narrowed in some areas, historically marginalized communities continue to face unequal access to quality institutions, experienced teachers, learning resources and higher levels of education (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008; Goel & Husain, 2018).

7.2 Child Marriage, Domestic Responsibilities and School Dropout

Child marriage remains a serious interruption to girls' education. Marriage frequently transfers a girl from the role of student to that of wife, daughter-in-law and, soon afterward, mother. Married adolescents may face restrictions on movement, limited control over fertility and heavy domestic responsibilities. Indian research has associated child marriage with adverse reproductive outcomes and reduced opportunities for women's longer-term development (Raj et al., 2009).



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Domestic labour can also reduce attendance before marriage. Girls often care for younger siblings, cook, clean, collect water or fuel and support agricultural or home-based work. During illness, migration or financial hardship, their schooling may be treated as the most flexible household activity and therefore the first to be interrupted.

Dropout is rarely caused by one event. Poor academic support, repeated absence, distance from secondary schools, examination failure and marriage pressure can combine until a girl leaves school. Effective prevention requires early identification of irregular attendance, counselling for families, bridge courses, flexible learning arrangements and coordination with child-protection authorities.

7.3 Safety, Sanitation and Inadequate Educational Facilities

Fear of harassment during travel can restrict girls' choice of school or college. Families may withdraw girls when secondary institutions are far from home or when routes are considered unsafe. Safe public transport, bicycles, residential facilities and community-supervised travel can therefore influence enrolment and retention. Bihar's bicycle programme demonstrated that reducing the mobility barrier could substantially increase girls' secondary-school enrolment (Muralidharan & Prakash, 2017). School sanitation is equally important. Girls require functional, private and regularly maintained toilets, clean water and facilities for menstrual-hygiene management. Evidence from India shows that improved sanitation facilities can increase educational participation, with particularly important effects for adolescent girls (Adukia, 2017). Other institutional problems include teacher shortages, inaccessible buildings, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate hostels and gender-insensitive teaching materials. Merely constructing facilities is insufficient; maintenance, staffing, accountability and respectful treatment must also be ensured.

8. Rural, Urban and Social Disparities

National averages conceal major differences in women's educational experiences. A girl's educational opportunity is shaped not only by gender but also by where she lives, her household income, caste or tribal status, religion, disability and the educational development of her state or district. Policies must therefore address intersecting disadvantages rather than treating all Indian women as a uniform group.

8.1 Rural–Urban Educational Gap

Urban areas usually provide a greater concentration of secondary schools, colleges, coaching centres, libraries, digital infrastructure and employment opportunities. Urban families may also have better access to transportation and information about courses and careers. Rural girls, in comparison, may travel long distances to reach secondary or higher education institutions. Transport costs, poor roads, safety concerns and shortages of female teachers can limit their educational choices. Rural poverty and dependence on agriculture can create additional demands for girls' labour. Seasonal work, sibling care and household duties may result in irregular attendance. Evidence on rural school participation shows that household circumstances, parental education, local facilities and school quality strongly influence whether children remain enrolled (Drèze & Kingdon, 2001).

Digital education does not automatically eliminate this gap. Rural women may have weaker connectivity, limited access to personal devices and fewer opportunities to develop digital literacy. Consequently, online learning should complement rather than replace accessible schools, teachers, libraries and community learning centres.

8.2 Problems of Marginalized and Minority Women

Women belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minority communities, migrant families and other disadvantaged groups may experience multiple forms of exclusion. Economic deprivation may combine with social discrimination, geographic isolation, language differences and weak institutional representation. First-generation learners may receive limited academic guidance at home and may find school procedures, examinations and scholarship applications difficult to navigate. Tribal girls in remote areas may lack nearby schools that provide teaching in familiar languages or respect local cultural contexts. Migrant girls may lose schooling because of frequent movement and difficulties transferring records. Muslim women in some locations may face poverty, shortages of accessible institutions and family concerns regarding safety and culturally appropriate educational environments. These challenges should not be explained through cultural stereotypes; institutional access and socioeconomic conditions must be examined carefully.

Research on caste and educational transitions indicates that improvements in average participation can coexist with persistent inequality in completion and progression to higher levels (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008; Goel & Husain, 2018). Policies therefore require disaggregated data and targeted academic, financial and social support.

8.3 Regional Differences in Educational Development

Women's educational progress varies considerably among Indian states and districts. Regions with stronger public education systems, greater female literacy, accessible healthcare, better transport and more supportive gender norms generally produce better outcomes. Other regions continue to experience shortages of secondary schools, high dropout, teacher vacancies, child marriage and weak administrative capacity.



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Regional differences are also connected with historical investments in social development. States that expanded mass schooling and public services earlier often achieved higher female participation, whereas economically growing regions have not always achieved comparable educational equality. Kingdon (2007) notes that the expansion of Indian schooling has been substantial but uneven, with continuing concerns about quality, accountability and unequal learning opportunities.

District-level planning is therefore essential. National schemes should establish minimum standards, but interventions must be adapted to local barriers. A tribal district with scattered settlements may require residential schools and multilingual teachers, while a densely populated urban settlement may require safe transport, flexible timings and protection for migrant students. Uniform programmes cannot address such different educational conditions effectively.

9. Future Prospects and Policy Measures

The future of women's education in India depends on moving beyond numerical enrolment towards completion, learning, employability, leadership and genuine agency. Policy must follow girls across the educational life cycle—from early childhood and school entry to secondary education, higher education, skills and employment.

9.1 Universal Access to Quality Education

Universal access requires every girl to have an affordable and functional institution within reasonable distance. Public investment should prioritize early-childhood education, secondary schools, hostels, transport and qualified teachers in underserved districts. Scholarship payments, textbooks, meals, uniforms and menstrual-hygiene materials should be delivered reliably.

Access must also mean access to quality. Girls should acquire literacy, numeracy, scientific understanding, communication skills and critical thinking rather than merely progress from one grade to another. Schools should identify learning difficulties early and provide remedial support without humiliating students. The National Education Policy emphasizes equitable and inclusive education, including a Gender Inclusion Fund and support for socioeconomically disadvantaged groups (Ministry of Education, 2020).

9.2 Digital Literacy and Vocational Training

Digital literacy should be treated as a basic educational capability. Girls and women need access to devices, internet connectivity, local-language content and training in online safety, privacy, digital payments and information verification. Community digital centres and school computer laboratories can assist women who do not own personal devices.

Vocational education must be linked with changing labour-market needs. Training in healthcare, electronics, renewable energy, financial services, coding, advanced manufacturing and entrepreneurship can widen women's opportunities. Career counselling should actively challenge the division between "male" and "female" occupations. Training providers should be evaluated not only by enrolment or certification but also by placement quality, earnings, retention and women's control over income.

9.3 Safe, Inclusive and Gender-Sensitive Institutions

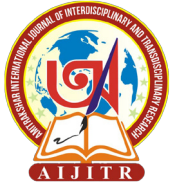
Educational institutions must protect women from harassment, discrimination and exclusion. This requires secure transport, functional complaint mechanisms, trained internal committees, adequate lighting, safe hostels and prompt action on violence. Teachers and administrators should be trained to recognize gender bias, caste discrimination, disability-related exclusion and mental-health needs.

Curricula should represent women as scientists, workers, leaders, farmers, entrepreneurs and decision-makers rather than only as dependent family members. Comprehensive life-skills education should include constitutional values, health, consent, legal rights, financial literacy and respectful relationships.

Most importantly, women and girls must participate in designing educational policy. Their experiences should inform school planning, transport arrangements, scholarship procedures, digital programmes and safety measures. When institutions listen to women as decision-makers rather than viewing them only as beneficiaries, education becomes a genuine instrument of empowerment.

10. Conclusion

India has made notable progress in women's education through expanded schooling, improved enrolment, higher literacy, greater participation in secondary and tertiary education, and targeted initiatives for girls from disadvantaged communities. Educational advancement has contributed to better health awareness, delayed marriage, reduced fertility, increased workforce participation, political consciousness, and stronger household decision-making. More women are entering professional, technical, administrative, scientific, and entrepreneurial fields, demonstrating education's transformative potential. Nevertheless, progress remains uneven. Rural location, poverty, caste, disability, minority status, digital deprivation, unsafe travel, inadequate infrastructure, unpaid care work, and persistent gender stereotypes continue to limit access, retention, achievement, and transition into secure employment. Sustainable empowerment cannot be achieved by government policy alone. It requires coordinated participation from families, communities, schools, universities, employers, local institutions,



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civil society organisations, and the media. Public investment must prioritise safe transport, functional sanitation, affordable digital access, scholarships, hostels, gender-sensitive curricula, trained teachers, and effective grievance mechanisms. Communities must challenge early marriage, son preference, restrictions on mobility, and unequal domestic responsibilities. Employers should support equal pay, safe workplaces, maternity protection, flexible opportunities, and leadership development. Educational institutions must create inclusive environments where women can speak, participate, innovate, and lead without discrimination or violence. Education remains the durable foundation of women's empowerment because it develops knowledge, confidence, thinking, economic capability, and awareness of rights. Yet education must extend beyond enrolment and certification. It should provide skills, digital competence, financial literacy, legal awareness, health education, and pathways to employment and entrepreneurship. Future policy must focus on both access and outcomes. Special attention is required for women facing disadvantages and those who have left formal education. Adult learning, vocational training, distance education, and community support can reopen opportunities. India's development will be stronger when every woman can learn, exercise informed choices, participate equally, and convert education into personal and collective agency.

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