Social Inclusion and Human Development in India: A Study on Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment and Education

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Abstract:

This study examines the complex relationship between social inclusion, gender equality, women's empowerment, and education in India, highlighting their combined impact on human development. Drawing on national datasets (Census 2011, NFHS-5, UDISE+, NSSO) and international indices (HDI, GII, GGG), the research highlights the persistent gender disparities in labor force participation (31.7%), political empowerment (5.9%), and economic autonomy (only 25.4% of women aged 15–49 receive paid work). Despite near parity in education (GPI: 1.05), rural and marginalized girls face high dropout rates. Qualitative analysis, supported by thematic and comparative tools, reveals how structural inequalities—rooted in caste, class, region, and patriarchy—impede inclusive development. Case studies (e.g., Kudumbashree, KGBV, Digital Saathi) showcase effective interventions. The study calls for gender-responsive policies, improved legal frameworks, digital inclusion, and transformative education to ensure equitable human development. Without closing the 44% gender gap (GGGR 2025), India risks stagnation in social progress and economic growth. Empowering women is not only a human right but essential for building a just and sustainable future

Keywords: Social Inclusion, Human Development, Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment, Education, India, Gender Gap.

1. Introduction

India's journey towards equitable and inclusive development has been marked by notable socio-economic transformations. Yet, the benefits of growth and modernization have not been distributed evenly, especially among women and marginalized communities. Social inclusion, which ensures that every individual and community has equal access to the opportunities and resources needed for a dignified life, remains a crucial goal. Human development, measured through indicators like health, education, and income, is intricately connected to societal inclusivity. To combat social exclusion, the concept of social inclusion was introduced, originating from French social policy in the 1970s and gaining traction during the economic crisis of the 1980s, when state-sponsored solidarity was emphasized. By 1990, theorists such as Bourdieu and Luhmann had explored the term, with Luhmann describing inclusion as the integration of the entire population into individual systems' functions. As inclusion progresses, the less social groups tend to fade. It was, therefore, a preoccupation that was also taken up in politics in Europe in the nineties (Lakshmi Nath et al., 2017).

It is important to note that the understanding of women's empowerment has also changed over time from welfare to equity. Thus, women empowerment becomes the proposition that a woman has power to obtain that power and shape her destiny beyond the confines of the existing social constructs. This idea is about getting women more involved in society, the economy, and politics. It's about making sure they have an equal say and can access the things they need. This paper looks at how education can help women, especially in India, make things

better for everyone. People think education is key to setting women free, giving them what they need to stand up for their rights and help their communities, as Sen pointed out back in 1997 (Dechen Ongmu, et al., 2024).

Gender equality isn't just a nice thing to have; it's a basic right and essential for real change (United Nations, 2015). In India, which has an amazing culture but lots of different situations, making gender equal is a big job. Even though things have gotten better lately, women still don't have the same chances in education, jobs, health care, and politics (Kabeer, etal., 2005; Dreze & Sen, et al., 2013). This holds women back and stops society from moving forward. Gender inequality has very old roots in India, going back to history, culture, and how society is set up. Although there are laws to protect women, they still face unfair situations. India's traditions keep things unequal, limiting what women can do (Chakravarti, 1993; Agarwal, 1994). Things like caste, social class, religion, and where someone lives can make things even tougher for women (Deshpande, et al., 2019). For example, women from lower castes or poorer areas have it harder than others (Thorat & Newman, et al., 2007). Women in the countryside struggle to get an education, health care, and work because of old-fashioned ways and not enough resources (Khan, et al., 2022).

In 2023, the world gender parity index (GGPI) showed that India still has a 44 percent gender division. To take care of this, things need to get better with jobs, unfairness at work, unequal sharing of housework, old traditions, not enough education and health care, and violence against women (T.S.K Durgesh Nandhini et al., 2024).

2. Methodology

This article takes a closer look using information that's already available. The information investigates how being included in society, gender equality, and education all relate to women in India. The goal is to explain the rules, social issues, and ways things are organized that involve how women progress in India.

3. Data Sources:

This study uses reliable sources, like the Census of India (2011), NFHS-5 (2019–21), UDISE+ (2022–23), NSSO, and reports from the Ministry of Women and Child Development. The study also uses info from UNDP Human Development Reports, the Global Gender Gap Reports by the World Economic Forum, and the Gender Inequality Index. A review of papers by researchers, policies, and government papers backs up what's said. Local examples have also been used to bring light to good efforts that are helping with equality and inclusive changes in India

3.1 Analytical Tools:

- Compare things over time: Gender information across areas is measured over time and in different parts of the country to spot trends.
- Identify Key Ideas: Key ideas like education, jobs, what policies do, and how different parts of someone's identity affect things are looked at to see patterns.
- Diagrams: Diagrams demonstrate the between things such as education, and development.
- The study doesn't collect new information but puts together data and research to create solutions. Some limitations are that it depends on existing information, which can have gaps or not be 100% consistent, especially in rural areas.

4. Conceptual Framework: Social Inclusion and Human Development

Being included means being able to participate in society, especially if you are poor or unneeded.

How people develop is a bigger idea from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which says that a country's best thing is its people. The Human Development Index (HDI) includes life expectancy, education, and living. Including people in society helps people get to these things, which pushes people forward in the long term.

Not including others can cause lack of access to health care, education, employment, and politics. It's important to remember that being included is about more than resources such as respect, and the right to make decisions.

5. Gender Equality in India: Present Scenario

Equality between genders is important to being included in society. In India, women are still dealing with inequalities nearly everywhere. The gap between what a man experiences compared to a woman is clear when they consider work, wages, politics, and also education and health care.

India was number 127 out of 146 in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023. The separation in genders can be seen with payment and job-related opportunities along with fair treatment within politics. These come from old traditions, not having enough education and health access, and keeping money limited.

5.1 Key Statistics:

- Women in the Workforce: ~25% (2022-23)
- Are men and women attending Higher Education equally: 1.05 (Good, but some areas are far from meeting this)
- Women's voices in Lok Sabha: ~15%
- Deaths of mothers during births: 97 per 100,000 live births (2020 data)

The continued use of some old traditions, as well as the lack of money and culture, keeps women from meeting their goals and excludes them from society.

6. Role of Education in Women's Empowerment

Education starts the development of a more welcoming society. Educated women often participate in the workforce, stand up for themselves, and participate in communities. Some services, such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Beti Bachao Beti Padhan, and the Right to Education Act, have participated in education for women.

As well as growing the potential of individual women, it creates the opportunity for entire communities to benefit. Women who are well educated will have smaller families and value school.

Even with these developments, there are issues that stop education for girls. These can include teen marriage, gender violence, lack of sanitation in schools, and ideas of society. From UDISE+ 2022–23 data, dropping out among younger girls who are in poorer areas continues to be a problem compared to boys.

7. Government Policies and Legal Framework

India has begun work on a variety of policy practices with a focus on assisting and including women. Those services include:

- The National Policy for Women (2016): A focus on social and economic.
- POSHAN Abhiyaan: Works against bad eating habits bothering women and children.
- Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017: Extends paid time off after having a child from 12 to 26 weeks.

- Skill India and Stand-Up India: Helps women by beginning their businesses.
- National Education Policy 2020: The intent is to finish gender separations in education for high school to college.

7.1 Legal reforms have significantly contributed to societal change:
- The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005)
- The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006)
- The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013)

Unfortunately, the distribution of services and policies can be hard due to a lack of understanding and pushback within society.

8. Socio-Economic Barriers to Inclusion
Even with recent changes in legislation, women can still deal with:
- Poverty: Families that are low on funds might value the education of boys more than educating girls.
- Caste and Region: Women who are discriminated against or live in poor areas can experience problems.
- Digital Divide: Women tend to lack access to the internet and other tech.
- Unpaid Care Work: The problems of taking care of a household weigh heavily on women.

Violence against women, along with human rights. According to the NCRB (2022), more than 400,000 have been filed, promoting the value of creating a safe environment.

9. Role of Civil Society and NGOs
Civilians begin to push for women's rights and advancement for inclusion. NGOs that provide these services participate in training women while raising awareness.

Ways things work like public-private projects such as Nand Ghar help for improving the access of women's healthcare, food, and education.

10. Case Studies and Success Stories
Case Study 1: Kudumbashree Mission, Kerala A project focused helping against women's poverty giving them Groups focused on assistance in developing skills. Women who participate in the Kudumbashree have helped in local governments helping developing local communities.

Case Study 2: KGBV Schools Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya's have helped education rates for girls with little opportunities by providing education and help with meals.

Case Study 3: Digital Saathi Program Created in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, the intent is to help the access to tech and money for rural women successfully handling digital inequality.

The study of success and cases display the impact and opportunities for creating developments within gender equality.

11. Intersectionality: Caste, Class, and Religion
Inclusion must think about the different identities. For example women can be abused because of who they are and even deal with domestic situations.

The Sachar Committee's (2006) show the need of educating Muslim women help with employment opportunities Similarly, to transgender people (who have had legal recognition in India after the NALSA in 2014) need the means fully engage with education.

12. Media, Technology, and Awareness Campaigns
Mass media, sites, and social. efforts have contributed to helping gender and creating social talks. Digital media has helped provide women with the necessary information. There should also be a focus on creating level access with devices and data.

Table 1: An overview of key inclusion indicators in India

Indicator	India Value (%) / Score	Year (Survey / Report)	Notes
Human Development Index (HDI)	0.685 (≈ 68.5 %)	2023 HDI report (Rank: 130/193) (Reuters)	Score out of 1.
Gender Inequality Index (GII)	0.437	2022 data (UNDP, UNDP)	Lower is better; India ~108/166 countries.
Global Gender Gap Score	64.4 % (gender parity closed)	Global Gender Gap Report 2025 (Rank: 131/148)	Global average ~68.8 %.
Economic Participation & Opportunity sub-score	40.7 %	GGG Report 2025 (Sanskriti IAS, World Economic Forum)	Includes earned income parity (~29.9 %) and LFPR (~45.9 %).
Educational Attainment sub-score	97.1 %	GGG Report 2025 (Sanskriti IAS, World Economic Forum)	Nearly full gender parity in literacy/enrollment.
Health & Survival sub-score	~95 %	GGG Report 2025 (World Economic Forum, World Economic Forum)	Sex ratio at birth improvement key driver.
Political Empowerment sub-score	≈ 5.9 %	GGG Report 2025 (Sanskriti IAS, World Economic Forum)	MPs ≈ 13.8 %, ministers ≈ 5.6 %.
Female employment (NFHS-5: women 15–49 employed)	~31–32 %	NFHS-5 (2019–21) (The Hindu, mint)	Paid cash ~25 %; unpaid/informal common.
Female labour force participation (PLFS 2023–24)	~31.7 %	PLFS as reported in Reuters (July 2025) (Reuters)	Still far below global/G20 average (~50 %).
Women's paid work	~25.4 % of women (15–49) paid in cash	NFHS-5 (Down To Earth)	Very few receive formal cash wages.
UDISE+ national school digital infrastructure	Computers: ~57 %, Internet: ~53.9 %	UDISE+ 2023-24 (reported Jan 2025) (India Today, Education for All in India)	Electricity ~89 %+ in most schools.

13. Evaluation of Inclusion Indicators

To see how we're doing with social inclusion, we need to gather data that breaks things down by gender in all sorts of areas. Some key reports and indexes to watch are:

- Human Development Index (HDI)
- Gender Inequality Index (GII)
- Global Gender Gap Report (WEF)
- NFHS and UDISE+ surveys

14. Way Forward

To guarantee that social inclusion leads to meaningful human development, India needs to:

1. Allocate resources for gender-sensitive educational facilities
2. Foster women's involvement in STEM fields and enhance digital literacy
3. Broaden safety nets and reinforce legal protections
4. Enhance institutional accountability across all tiers
5. Motivate male engagement in gender equity initiatives
6. Create mentorship and leadership development programs for women

15. Conclusions

India's advancement in human development is closely tied to achieving gender equality and empowering women through inclusive education. Despite various policy initiatives, significant disparities persist. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2025, India ranks 131st out of 148 countries, with an overall parity score of 64.4% and a mere 5.9% in political empowerment. Female labour force participation stands at only 31.7%, and just 25.4% of women aged 15–49 receive cash payments for their work, indicating a lack of economic autonomy. Although the Gender Parity Index in higher education is 1.05, dropout rates among rural and marginalized girls remain alarmingly high. India's Human Development Index (HDI) score of 0.685 reveals significant gaps in health, education, and income, while the economic participation sub-score of 40.7% suggests that educational empowerment is not leading to equal opportunities. To make progress, India must implement gender-responsive education, enhance legal protections, and ensure equal access to technology and opportunities. Empowering all women is not merely a developmental objective; it is crucial for fostering an equitable, inclusive, and prosperous nation.

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