Gender Identity and Visibility in Educational Institutions: Perceptions and Awareness Among Students of Ernakulam, Kerala

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Abstract

Gender identity is a dynamic and evolving concept, yet individuals who identify beyond the traditional gender binary often face marginalization in visibility and acceptance. This study explores the awareness and perceptions of gender identity and visibility among higher secondary and undergraduate students, as well as faculty members, in educational institutions in Ernakulam, Kerala, India. Using a mixed-methods approach, quantitative data were collected through structured online surveys from students, while qualitative insights were obtained via group discussions with educators. The study aims to assess attitudes toward various gender identities, examine the prevalence of gender-inclusive policies, and analyze the impact of socio-cultural and demographic factors on perceptions of gender identity. Results show limited awareness of gender diversity among students and a lack of formal training among faculty. No significant demographic differences in perceptions were found among students, and there were no notable differences between students and faculty regarding the inclusion of gender identity topics in curricula. These findings highlight the urgent need for institutional reforms, policy development, and targeted awareness initiatives to foster gender inclusivity within Kerala's educational environment.

Keywords: Educational Institutes, Gender, Identity, Students, Visibility

1. Introduction

Gender is viewed as a *"social construct"*, which is made of defined roles, behaviors and customs, that vary with time and society. These socially constructed traits cover the interactions between individuals, as well as the standards, roles and actions that come along with being a woman, girl, man or boy (Barr et al., 2023). "*Gender Identity*" may be defined as *"each person's internal and individual experience of gender"*. How a person identifies their gender depends on how they internally assign their own sense of gender, which may or may not be in line with the sex that they were assigned at birth (Corby et al., 2007; Diekman & Schmader, 2024).

Visibility is essential and of utmost importance. Achieving and promoting visibility includes providing a platform and opportunity for the world to understand that gender identity is not limited to being male or female (Rahilly, 2014). In broader terms, visibility refers to the extent to which a particular group or individual's issues are perceivable within cultural, political, and social contexts. Being visible means that individuals can be helped and assured that those with different identities are heard and seen, and valued for their abilities just as those with traditional identities (Ghisleni et al., 2016; Worthen, 2021).

Education plays a vital role in imparting knowledge for the betterment of society. It helps update the thoughts and opinions of individuals who still hold onto older impressions of gender and identity. It also provides space for the current student population to become aware of the changing scenarios related to gender identity and visibility. It can be stated that well-founded evidence confirms that education plays a powerful role in creating societal change that benefits its people, rather than just raising concerns over gender-based stereotypes (Mckinnon & O'Connell, 2020; Papadakis, 2018).

People probably never felt they were solely masculine or feminine at any point in human history. "But while different cultures at different times have been more or less open and accepting of different gender identities, many people today may be more comfortable expressing their identity and living their lives as members of the gender they believe they belong to than ever before." Focusing on India, there is still some reluctance when it comes to accepting gender identities other than cisgender (Haq, 2013; Mal 2018).

India recognizes three genders: male, female, and a third gender. The Supreme Court of India acknowledged transgender individuals as a third gender (Bhattacharya, 2019; Mahapatra, 2014). Gender identity is a complex system shaped by historical, cultural, legal, and religious factors. Considered a complicated topic in India, society has recognized a range of gender diversities and how they have evolved. However, despite this acknowledgment, attitudes and treatments towards individuals outside the binary gender system have varied over time.

A critical component to fostering inclusivity, equity, and a more comprehensive understanding of human identity is the essential need for society to advance in terms of gender visibility. Visibility plays a significant role, as it helps acknowledge an individual's psychological health, which is greatly affected by the prominence of gender identities (Kurki & Rask, 2025; Zentner & Von Aufsess, 2020). Visibility helps change society's attitude. Therefore, it plays a major role in de-stigmatization of gender identities. It is not just a narrow term based on observation, but rather a state of simply existing within a society that does not allow complete segregation; promotes inclusivity within communities, thereby reducing the stigmas faced. It also provides a sense of positive role modeling for younger generations who are still trying to understand and accept their self-identities (Bockting et al., 2019). They can be further empowered and encouraged to embrace and accept their identities, without being constrained and oppressed by the worries and prejudices they face. These include social rejection and exclusion, which they often experience through unfair depictions in media, educational settings, or in the public in general (Merino et al., 2024; Sweigart et al., 2024; Vinuales & Thomas, 2020).

Kerala, a major state in India known for its well-developed healthcare, high literacy rates, and progressive society, is recognized for being the first advocate state to acknowledge gender identities, especially the transgender community. However, the awareness of gender identity issues in educational institutions remains largely under-explored. The importance of this research lies in its potential to inform policy decisions, curriculum development, and institutional practices that promote inclusivity and support diverse gender identities (Skelton et al., 2006). As educational institutions play a crucial role in shaping societal attitudes and values, understanding existing perceptions and challenges related to gender identity can help create more inclusive and supportive learning environments. The findings of this study will not only add to the academic literature on gender identity in educational settings but also offer practical insights for policymakers, educators, and administrators in Kerala.

2. Literature Review

The review explores the development of gender identity and visibility, drawing on various theoretical pe-

rspectives and empirical studies.

Erikson (1968) argued that establishing identity is a key developmental task of adolescence, during which individuals explore different identities through social interactions to form a stable sense of self. Gender identity and visibility are essential for understanding gender in psychological, cultural, and social contexts, affecting how people interact with society and see themselves. Various studies (Barr et al., 2023; Kuper et al., 2018; Polderman et al., 2018) highlighted the importance of expressing gender in social relationships for developing internal gender identity. Theories such as cognitive development and social learning suggest that individuals develop identity through social interactions, expressing gender and receiving feedback.

Heller (2022) examined Freud's idea that gender is rooted in anatomical differences, with psychological differences emerging from physical distinctions between girls and boys. Researchers have proposed that men and women develop different emotional needs when raised by women (Abidin et al., 2022; Chaplin et al., 2019; Mckinney & Kwan, 2018). They also argue that women reproduce the unity experienced with same-sex parents, while males initially identify with mothers before forming masculine identity through rejection, seeing themselves as *"not women"*.

Brodowicz (2024) explained Freud's theory that gender identity develops during early childhood through psychosexual stages, where children identify with same-sex parents during the phallic stage (3-6 years) and internalize norms of femininity and masculinity. Freedman (1993) studied social structural theories, focusing on how society shapes gender roles rather than individual identity formation. These theories highlight social context, relationships between men and women, and stereotypes, with status and power playing key roles in maintaining gender differences. From a social role perspective, gender identity reflects how women and men are arranged within societal structures. These roles create a gendered character that establishes shared expectations for behavior.

As Brodowicz (2024) noted, "These gender roles, which reflect what people define as proper behavior for each gender, tend to shape the social, psychological, and personal aspects of individuals' lives and can be seen as the driving force behind gendered behavior and the development of human identity." Evolutionary theories of gender identity examine adaptation and natural selection processes that influence gender-related behaviors and roles (Buss, 2009; Seiffert-Brockmann, 2018).

Bussey and Bandura (1999) proposed that social cognitive theory helps children learn by observing others in their social circles, involving attention, motivation, reproduction, and retention. Dodgers et al. (2023) explained that gender categorization influences life trajectories related to identity, employment, social activities, and responsibilities, with women often working in social care roles and men dominating technology and management fields. Gender visibility represents diverse gender identities within society, challenging traditional norms and fostering inclusion.

L and Jayadev (2024) examined transgender visibility in Kerala, discussing "passing"—how transgender individuals present themselves to match their identity and others' perception of their gender. Varughese (2024) explored the matrilineal system of property inheritance in Keralite society, where men are traditionally the primary breadwinners. Kerala's evolving gender perceptions reflect a mix of social, economic, and historical factors. Manav (2024) reported on initiatives by Kerala's Education Department and SCERT to promote an inclusive society by addressing gender stereotypes and fostering empathy for differently-abled individuals. The State Policy for Transgender Persons in Kerala, approved in 2015, aims to protect the fundamental rights of transgender people. Tharayil (2024) noted that during the 1990s, identities and sexuality were viewed negatively, with AIDS considered a *"gay affliction"*.

Philip (2018) studied fifty transgender individuals in Ernakulam district, revealing high levels of harassment in public spaces, threats, sexual harassment, and police misconduct. Aneesh (2016) reported that disabled transgender people often dropped out of school due to negative treatment, discrimination, and harassment from peers, authorities and teacher.

This review highlights the complex interactions of psychological, social, and cultural factors in shaping gender identity and visibility, stressing the need for ongoing research and policy efforts to address ongoing challenges and promote inclusivity.

3. Methodology

A. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-method approach to examine students' awareness and faculty perspectives on gender identity and visibility in Kerala's educational institutions. Data were gathered through an electronic survey from 88 students in Ernakulam, along with a group discussion with faculty members. Convenience sampling was used to select participants via social media platforms.

B. Objectives

1. To assess students' awareness, understanding, and attitudes towards gender identity and visibility.
2. To examine the prevalence of gender-inclusive policies and practices in educational institutions.
3. To identify the barriers faced by students in addressing gender identity and visibility issues in an educational setting
4. To assess the availability and effectiveness of support systems for students with diverse gender identities in educational institutions.

C. Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical standards by obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring their voluntary participation. To maintain confidentiality, personal identifiers were removed, and data were securely stored and used only for research. These steps protected participants' identities and kept their information safe from unauthorized access.

D. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using statistical methods such as descriptive statistics, cross-tabulation, chi-square analysis, t-tests, and Pearson's correlation. The qualitative data from group discussions were analyzed thematically.

4. Results & Discussion

A. Demographic Overview

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics: Age Distribution of Participants

Age group (years)	N	%	M	SD
15-19	72	81.8	16	0.75
20-25	16	18.2	20	2.08

The study sample included 88 students, of whom 59 were high school students and 29 were undergraduates. Most participants (81.8%) were aged 15-19, with an average age of 16 years (SD = 0.75), as shown in Table 1.

B. Awareness Levels Regarding Gender Identity

Table 2
Awareness Levels Regarding Gender Identity

Awareness Level	N	%
Do not know about it at all	5	5.7
Heard about it, but do not know much	25	28.4
Heard and know a little about it	39	44.3
Know about it completely	19	21.6

Awareness levels pertaining to gender identity among students are shown in Table 2. A total of 44.3% reported moderate awareness ("heard and know a little"), while only 21.6% reported full awareness.

C. Awareness and Inclusion Metrics

Table 3
Awareness and Inclusion Metrics with Chi-Square Analysis

Variable	Yes (%)	No (%)	χ^2	p
Awareness of gender identity topic	93.1	6.9	0.01	.98
Support for inclusive identity options	57.9	42.1	3.67	.054

Table 3 summarizes cross-tabulations regarding topic awareness, the inclusion of non-binary options, and chi-square analysis results. Chi-square tests showed no significant relationship between student category and awareness of the topic's prevalence ($p = .98$) or the inclusion of non-binary options ($p = .054$).

D. Perceptions on Curriculum Inclusion and Institutional Awareness

Table 4
Perceptions on Curriculum Inclusion and Institutional Awareness

Measure	Yes (%)	No (%)	χ^2	p
Support inclusion in curriculum	65.9	34.1	8.14	.004*
Institutions have some awareness	70.4	29.6	-	-

Significant at $p < .05$.

Table 4 shows students' responses about curriculum inclusion and institutional awareness. A significant link was found between student category and support for curriculum inclusion ($p = .004$).

E. Barriers to Gender Identity Visibility

Table 5
Barriers to Gender Identity Visibility

Barrier	Reporting (%)
Bullying and harassment	59.1
Lack of institutional support	52.3
Social rejection or ostracism	44.3
Lack of rights and opportunities	30.7

Barrier	Reporting (%)
Cultural or religious obstacles	25.0

Barriers perceived by students are outlined in Table 5. Bullying and harassment (59.10%) were the most common, indicating that "being subjected to bullying and harassment" was seen as the main challenge for individuals of different gender identities (Witcomb et al., 2019). This is supported by the idea that there are still negative perceptions of gender identities and limited exposure to mainstream society. 52.30% of the responses indicated that a lack of support from social institutions might be a barrier to visibility and inclusion (Hinkle et al., 2025).

Some respondents believed that being outcast and ostracized due to differences (44.30%), the lack of rights and opportunities (30.70%), and religious and cultural appropriations (25%) played a minor role as obstacles for individuals to express their identities and live safely (Slepian & Jacoby-Senghor, 2020). Even with laws in place for transgender individuals, they still face significant challenges in gaining societal acceptance and are often treated poorly (Bhattacharya, 2022; Raghuram et al., 2024). The lack of recognition of queer identities may be linked to the discomfort surrounding the topic in general, especially in a country like India where acceptance of gender identities is still evolving (Bhattacharya, 2022).

F. Institutional Measures for Gender Inclusivity

Table 6
Institutional Measures for Gender Inclusivity

Implementation of Measures	Yes (%)	No (%)	χ^2	p
Policies implemented	0	100	0.00	1.0

Both student groups unanimously indicated that there are no institutional policies on gender inclusivity (see Table 6).

G. Key Insights from Group Discussion Analysis

The group discussion provided several key insights into faculty members' understanding, attitudes, and responses toward gender identity, inclusion, and institutional support.

1. *Understanding of Gender Identity*: Most participants described gender identity as a person's internal sense of self. They saw it as separate from assigned sex, emphasizing self-awareness and authenticity. However, a few participants equated gender with a strict binary—male and female—based on theological and biological determinism. This difference in understanding reveals a disciplinary and ideological gap. One participant commented, *"Gender identity is about personal self-understanding; visibility is about societal recognition and representation. Both are crucial for fostering an inclusive and supportive environment."*

2. *Barriers to Acceptance*: Participants acknowledged that individuals expressing non-normative identities often face significant backlash, including social stigma, familial rejection, bullying, and emotional distress (Eaton & Rios, 2017; Hirsh & Kang, 2015; Matsuno & Budge, 2017). These challenges were mainly attributed to ignorance and a lack of awareness within society. One participant observed, *"Children may be prevented from expressing their gender preferences, which may be detrimental to their emotional wellbeing, and may suffer discrimination, bullying and abuse."* This recognition indicates an underlying empathy among faculty, despite varying levels of understanding.

3. *Institutional* Gaps: A common concern raised was the lack of gender-inclusive policies and practices at their educational institutions. Most participants admitted they had not implemented any structured initiatives or educational frameworks that address gender identity and visibility. This shortcoming was attributed either to a lack of formal training or a perceived absence of gender-diverse student populations. Some faculty members relied on social media to fill this informational gap, with one stating, *"I felt they are updated with social media,"* implying that digital platforms have a bigger role in student awareness than institutional efforts.

4. *Educational Interventions and* Awareness: There was widespread agreement on the need for structured educational programs to increase awareness among students and faculty alike. Participants responded positively to the idea of including gender and identity topics in academic curricula, noting that such education could help reduce confusion among younger generations navigating gender identity (Boskey, 2014; Young et al., 2006). This aligns with recent policy efforts, such as the Government of Kerala's integration of SOGIESC (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sex Characteristics) into the school curriculum.

5. *Support Systems and Allies*: When asked how they would respond to a student or colleague seeking guidance on gender-related issues, participants provided varied answers. Some indicated they would help if they had enough knowledge, while others highlighted their limitations and emphasized the need to refer individuals to proper support systems. One participant said, *"If I know about the matter, I will help; otherwise, I will find the right person to assist him/her."* Although formal training was lacking, most expressed a willingness to support students in any way possible. The discussion revealed both openness and limitations in faculty perspectives. While there is an emerging awareness of gender identity and related challenges, institutional inertia and a lack of formal education persist. Addressing these gaps through structured training, policy development, and inclusive curricula is crucial to creating a more supportive and informed educational environment (Eden et al., 2024; Fraser, 2018; Jewell & Petty, 2024; Khethiwe, 2023; Kollmayer et al., 2020; Mcquillan & Leininger, 2020).

Implications

Gender diversity and inclusivity are essential for fostering a comprehensive and progressive attitude in educational institutions and their systems in Kerala. These challenges often arise due to lack of exposure, normalized biases, and inadequate facilities and practices for these individuals (Ghosh, 2015), which require clarity and active addressing.

To promote gender equality as guaranteed under Article 15 of the Indian Constitution, the Government of India has proposed establishing Gender Champions within educational institutions across the country. Gender Champions are envisioned as proactive leaders who will foster an inclusive and equitable environment in their respective schools and colleges (Audette et al., 2018; Haq, 2013). Their responsibilities include providing strategic guidance to peer groups in incorporating gender perspectives into all institutional activities.

This includes facilitating discursive activities such as group discussions, debates, and literary expressions in the form of essays and poetry, as well as organizing capacity-building workshops, experiential learning visits, thematic theatrical performances, and artistic competitions. Additionally, they are responsible for delivering specialized training and life skills education while providing guidance to educators and parents, thereby strengthening gender-sensitive pedagogy and institutional practices.

There is a notable gap in the training offered to both students and faculty, which must be addressed. Additionally, institutional awareness should be explored, as it serves as a guiding light for imparting knowledge to current and future generations.

Recommendations

1. Inclusion in the Curriculum

- Through curriculum inclusivity, reforms in educational syllabi can better introduce gender-focused topics, thereby providing a platform to enhance awareness and knowledge among students and faculty members (Basnet, 2024).
- The significance of gender studies and their ethics can be introduced as an important discussion topic for deeper understanding (Caywood & Darmstadt, 2024; Hek et al., 2019).

2. Training Schemes for Faculty Members

- A series of awareness and training programs could be implemented to help faculty members and other institutional staff gain more knowledge and awareness about gender identity (Kumagai et al., 2007; Soto-Greene et al., 2018).
- Equipping teaching staff with the skills needed to facilitate gender discussions could help students develop the right understanding. This could also improve future interactions with individuals of diverse identities (L'Erario et al., 2024).

Limitations

1. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, an extensive focus group discussion was not feasible.
2. The results are limited by the use of convenience sampling, small sample size, and reliance on self-reported surveys, which affect their generalizability.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the perceptions of gender identity and visibility among students and faculty in educational institutions in Ernakulam district, Kerala. The research uncovered limited awareness and understanding of diverse gender identities among students, with most people being only familiar with terms like "transgender" and "cisgender" and lacking knowledge of other queer identity terms. This supports the idea that students in Kerala's educational institutions have a narrow understanding of gender diversity. Statistical analysis revealed no significant difference in awareness levels between higher secondary and undergraduate students, supporting the idea that demographic factors do not significantly affect students' gender identity awareness. The study also explored faculty perspectives on gender identity and their readiness to engage with diverse gender identities. These findings offer a deeper insight into the current level of gender inclusivity in Kerala's educational institutions and emphasize the importance of increased awareness and training initiatives to promote a more inclusive educational environment.

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