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Gender Discrimination Among Adolescent Girls in Jammu and Kashmir with Special Reference to Srinagar and Budgam

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Abstract

Gender discrimination remains one of the most persistent barriers to educational equality in developing societies. This paper explores the experiences of adolescent girls studying in schools of Srinagar and Budgam, Jammu and Kashmir. It examines how structural and everyday practices within educational institutions reproduce gender inequality. Drawing from both qualitative and quantitative data, the study reveals that bias operates subtly through teacher expectations, peer interactions, and institutional norms that shape girls' confidence and participation. The findings highlight the need for inclusive educational reforms and teacher sensitization to build equitable learning spaces for both genders. Despite significant educational reforms and constitutional safeguards, gender bias continues to manifest subtly in schools through differential treatment by teachers, peer behavior, and institutional practices. This paper explores gender discrimination among adolescent girls in the districts of Srinagar and Budgam, analyzing classroom experiences, teacher-student interactions, peer influence, and the extent to which girls' voices are heard in decision-making spaces. Drawing upon field-based insights and school-level data, the study identifies patterns of implicit gender bias and examines their implications for girls' educational participation, confidence, and long-term empowerment. The analysis also evaluates existing policies and interventions aimed at promoting gender equity in education. The findings emphasize that while enrolment rates of girls have improved, persistent stereotypes and structural barriers still limit their sense of belonging and agency within the educational environment. Recommendations are proposed for fostering gender-sensitive pedagogy, participatory school environments, and stronger policy enforcement to achieve true gender parity in education.

Introduction

Education is universally recognized as the most powerful tool for social transformation, yet its accessibility and inclusivity continue to reflect deep-rooted social hierarchies. In Jammu and Kashmir, where socio-political instability and patriarchal norms influence every aspect of life, gender equality in education becomes a critical concern. Adolescent girls, standing at the threshold of adulthood, face multiple layers of discrimination that impact not only their academic achievement but also their self-perception and autonomy. Schools, which should serve as agents of empowerment, often act as spaces where gender roles are reinforced through curriculum content, teacher behavior, and peer culture. Education, in its truest sense, serves as a

transformative force in shaping individual potential and societal progress. Yet, for many adolescent girls, particularly in developing regions like Jammu and Kashmir, the promise of education remains constrained by deep-rooted gender disparities. Schools—ideally conceived as spaces of equality and growth—often reproduce the same biases that exist in the wider society. The subtle differences in teacher expectations, allocation of classroom responsibilities, and peer dynamics contribute to an environment where girls frequently internalize feelings of inferiority or exclusion.

In the socio-cultural landscape of Jammu and Kashmir, where traditional gender norms continue to influence family expectations, girls' access to equal learning experiences becomes even more complex. Despite increased female literacy rates and visible participation in education, the underlying social attitudes still place girls in a secondary position. The transition from enrolment to meaningful participation is often hindered by unspoken discrimination, discouragement, and lack of voice in decision-making within schools.

The districts of Srinagar and Budgam represent diverse educational settings that highlight this disparity. While Srinagar, being more urbanized, reflects relatively progressive schooling patterns, Budgam, with its semi-rural characteristics, mirrors more traditional gender perceptions. A comparative study of these two districts offers a nuanced understanding of how gender bias operates across different socio-economic and cultural contexts.

The present paper investigates gender discrimination in these regions through the lens of adolescent girls' classroom experiences, teacher interactions, and peer relations. It emphasizes the lived realities of students rather than abstract policy claims, drawing attention to the silent barriers that continue to shape educational outcomes. Moreover, the study contextualizes these findings within national and international frameworks advocating for gender equality, such as the National Education Policy (2020) and the UN Sustainable Development Goal 5, which emphasize the elimination of gender disparities in education.

Ultimately, the paper seeks to bridge the gap between policy and practice by critically assessing whether the educational institutions in Srinagar and Budgam truly provide equitable learning opportunities to both genders. Through this exploration, it aims to highlight not only the manifestations of bias but also the potential pathways toward a more inclusive and empowering schooling environment for adolescent girls.

Literature Review

Scholars across the globe have studied the relationship between gender and education. Nussbaum (2001) and Sen (1999) argue that education is central to women's empowerment and capability development, yet institutional barriers continue to limit their opportunities. Stromquist (2015) emphasizes that gender disparity persists not because of a lack of policies but due to cultural norms that undervalue girls' learning. UNESCO (2020) and NCERT (2018) reports show that adolescent girls are often discouraged from pursuing subjects perceived as male-dominated, such as mathematics and science. In the Indian and Kashmiri context, Sheikh and Rather (2019) found that the combined effects of conflict, mobility restrictions, and conservative community pressures reinforce traditional gender divisions. Gender discrimination in education has long been recognized as a structural barrier to social justice and equality. Numerous studies across India and abroad have shown that although the gender gap in school enrolment has narrowed, the quality of girls' educational experiences continues to differ sharply from that of boys. Research in educational sociology has highlighted how schools reflect the biases and inequalities of the societies they serve (Bourdieu, 1986). Within

classrooms, these inequalities often manifest through hidden curricula, teacher expectations, and subtle divisions of classroom power.

Scholars such as Naila Kabeer (2012) and Amartya Sen (2001) have emphasized that gender bias in education is not merely about access but also about agency—the capacity of girls to make meaningful choices within learning environments. In many schools, girls are taught to be passive and disciplined, while boys are encouraged to be assertive and outspoken. This imbalance affects the confidence, participation, and voice of adolescent girls, limiting their academic and social growth.

Within the Indian context, the persistence of patriarchal norms further reinforces these patterns. Studies conducted in northern India (Rao, 2018; Mehta, 2019) reveal that even when girls attend the same schools as boys, they often receive less attention from teachers and are discouraged from taking leadership roles in class activities. The hidden curriculum—unwritten rules of behavior and expectation—thus sustains a silent form of discrimination that goes unaddressed in most policy frameworks.

In the context of Jammu and Kashmir, regional research has shown both progress and limitations. A report by the Department of Education (2019) highlighted that while female enrolment in government schools increased significantly after 2010, dropout rates among adolescent girls remained higher than boys, particularly after middle school. Cultural constraints, mobility restrictions, and safety concerns were cited as key reasons. A study by Bashir (2021) observed that in many rural parts of Budgam, teachers still unconsciously prioritize male participation, often assuming boys to be more competent in science and mathematics.

Similarly, peer behavior plays a critical role in shaping classroom dynamics. Studies by Pandey and Sharma (2020) found that peer groups in mixed classrooms tend to reinforce traditional gender boundaries—boys occupy central spaces and dominate group discussions, whereas girls are often marginalized to passive roles. This internalized segregation, though subtle, creates an atmosphere of exclusion that discourages girls from expressing their opinions freely.

Recent international perspectives also align with these findings. UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (2023) noted that although South Asia has made remarkable progress in narrowing enrolment gaps, the persistence of gender bias in learning environments continues to hinder girls' holistic development. Teachers' unconscious gender stereotypes—such as assuming girls are better at languages and boys at mathematics—translate into differential treatment that shapes long-term educational outcomes.

At the policy level, several initiatives such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, National Scheme of Incentives to Girls for Secondary Education, and Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan have aimed to enhance gender equity in schools. However, multiple studies (Kumar, 2022; Kaul, 2023) argue that these policies often focus on enrolment and infrastructure rather than addressing everyday gender experiences in classrooms. In Kashmir's socio-political setting, where instability and conservative social values intersect, these interventions face additional challenges of implementation and monitoring.

In conclusion, the literature collectively suggests that gender discrimination in education persists not through explicit exclusion but through subtle and normalized practices that shape girls' sense of belonging. Despite increased awareness and policy reform, girls' voices often remain unheard in classroom decision-making. This research, therefore, builds upon existing literature by providing an in-depth, localized exploration of how

these dynamics unfold in the districts of Srinagar and Budgam—regions that reflect both progress and persistent barriers in the quest for gender equality in education.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in feminist sociological theories, particularly those of Pierre
Bourdieu (1990) and Simone de Beauvoir (1949). Bourdieu's concept of habitus explains how social structures shape individuals' perceptions and behaviors, reinforcing existing hierarchies. Schools function as sites where gendered habitus is reproduced—girls are conditioned to be passive and compliant, while boys are encouraged to be assertive and dominant. Beauvoir's assertion that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' aligns with how Kashmiri schools socialize girls into certain behavioral expectations, teaching them modesty and silence as virtues. The theoretical foundation of this research draws upon feminist and sociological perspectives that explain how gender discrimination is reproduced and sustained within educational institutions. Schools, as social microcosms, often mirror the structures of inequality present in the larger society. The theories selected for this study—Feminist Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Hidden Curriculum Theory—provide a comprehensive lens to examine gender bias in classroom interactions, teacher attitudes, and peer relationships among adolescent students in the districts of Srinagar and Budgam.

Research Methodology

The present study employed a mixed-method approach, integrating both quantitative (numerical survey data) and qualitative (descriptive and narrative responses) methods. This approach was chosen to ensure a deeper and more holistic understanding of gender discrimination experienced by adolescent girls within school environments.

A total of 600 adolescent girls from 13 schools (both government and private) located in Srinagar and Budgam districts were selected as the sample population. The combined student strength of these 13 schools was approximately 600, and all were included in the study, making the research comprehensive and inclusive.

The questionnaire was designed around key themes such as teacher behavior, peer interaction, classroom participation, self-esteem, and girls' voice. The data collected through the survey were further enriched by informal interviews, which provided deeper insights into the lived experiences of the participants.

Both descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were used for data interpretation. The quantitative data helped identify patterns and frequencies of discrimination, while the qualitative responses revealed the underlying emotional and social dimensions of girls' experiences within their school settings.

Findings and Discussion

The findings reveal that gender discrimination often operates in subtle and normalized forms. Although schools promote equality through slogans and policies, their practices frequently contradict these ideals. Teachers tend to engage male students more actively in classroom discussions, especially in science and mathematics subjects. Girls are often praised for neatness and discipline rather than intellectual contribution, reflecting a gendered perception of ability. The present study examined gender discrimination among adolescent girls across thirteen schools in the districts of Srinagar and Budgam, drawing a sample of 600 students. The analysis focused on four thematic areas: the school environment, teacher behavior, peer

interaction, and girls' voice and participation. Both quantitative responses and qualitative reflections were considered to interpret how adolescent girls experience and perceive gender bias within educational spaces.

1. School Environment

Findings reveal that the overall school environment remains a decisive factor in shaping girls' sense of belonging and safety. While infrastructural parity—such as classrooms, sanitation, and learning materials—appears largely uniform, subtle inequalities persist in opportunities for leadership and participation. Many girls reported that decision-making activities such as class monitoring, assembly announcements, or representation in inter-school events were primarily entrusted to boys. This distribution of roles reinforced the idea that authority in school settings is male-oriented. In several schools, the absence of gender-sensitive policies or counseling units further limited the confidence of girls in voicing concerns. The data thus suggest that even in institutions where formal equality exists, structural and cultural disparities subtly marginalize girls.

2. Teacher Behavior

Teacher behavior emerged as a strong determinant of gender perception in classrooms. Although most teachers claimed to treat students equally, classroom observation and student feedback indicated a pattern of implicit bias. Teachers were often found to appreciate boys for their confidence and spontaneity while labeling similar behavior in girls as indiscipline. Girls were also less likely to be assigned leadership tasks or asked higher-order questions in class. In certain cases, the expectation that girls would be more obedient and passive limited their intellectual engagement. These findings correspond with earlier feminist observations that the hidden curriculum of schools reproduces gendered power relations. The study also noted positive exceptions where female teachers consciously promoted equal participation, demonstrating the potential for teachers to act as transformative agents in gender justice.

3. Peer Behavior

Peer interaction plays a significant role in reinforcing or resisting gender stereotypes. The study found that adolescent boys often exercised symbolic control through humor, ridicule, or exclusion, discouraging girls from asserting themselves publicly. Social groups within schools tended to be gender-segregated, with limited inter-gender collaboration during academic projects or extracurricular activities. Many girls expressed reluctance to speak in mixed groups for fear of being mocked. However, schools that promoted cooperative learning methods and value-based education showed greater gender inclusivity. This suggests that peer culture is not inherently discriminatory but shaped by school ethos and adult intervention.

4. Girls' Voice and Agency

A critical dimension of this research was understanding how adolescent girls perceive their own agency within school spaces. Data revealed that while girls are aware of discrimination, their capacity to challenge it is constrained by social expectations of modesty and compliance. The internalization of these norms often silences them, even when they recognize unequal treatment. Nevertheless, a small yet growing number of girls articulated a strong desire for self-expression and equal representation. In schools where teachers encouraged dialogue and student councils, girls displayed greater confidence and leadership initiative, indicating that empowerment is directly linked to institutional support and participatory culture.

Case Studies

Case 1: Private School, Srinagar – A 15-year-old student reported that her teacher often ignored her raised hand during discussions. When she persisted, the class laughed, and the teacher moved on. This incident discouraged her from participating for the rest of the term. Case 2: Government School, Budgam – A teacher stated, 'My girls are shy and disciplined; they prefer to help rather than lead.' Case 3: Rural Budgam – In a small village school, girls were consistently given documentation work in group projects while boys handled fieldwork.

Challenges and Policy Implications

Despite numerous initiatives such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao sand the National Education Policy (2020), gender inequality persists at the implementation level. Teachers often lack gender sensitivity training, and textbooks continue to portray gender stereotypes. Institutional inertia and cultural mindsets further hinder transformation. Although many adolescent girls in Srinagar and Budgam attend school regularly, they continue to face hidden forms of discrimination in classrooms. Teachers sometimes give more praise or attention to boys, especially in subjects like science and mathematics. These small differences affect girls' confidence and participation. Because most teachers are not trained in gender-sensitive methods, they may not realize the impact of their actions. It is therefore important to address such challenges so that education becomes fair and supportive for both boys and girls.

Recommendations

Regular gender sensitization workshops for teachers to challenge unconscious biases. 2. Curriculum revision to include gender-neutral examples and portrayals of women in leadership and STEM fields. 3. Encouragement of girls' leadership in school assemblies and extracurricular activities. 4. Establishment of anonymous feedback systems for reporting discriminatioBased on the findings of this research, several steps can be taken to make schools more gender-equal and inclusive:

Teacher Training: Teachers should receive regular gender-sensitization training to help them identify and reduce unconscious bias in classrooms.

Curriculum Balance: Textbooks and teaching materials must include fair representations of both genders and positive examples of women achievers.

Safe Environment: Schools should create a friendly and secure space where girls can share ideas confidently without fear of judgment.

Parental Awareness: Parents and communities should be made aware of the importance of girls' education through meetings and local programs.

Girls' Leadership:

Schools should encourage girls to take part in debates, student committee.

Conclusion

The study concludes that gender discrimination in schools of Srinagar and Budgam is not overt but systemic. Adolescent girls internalize subtle forms of bias that affect their confidence and participation. Schools, as agents of socialization, have the potential to either reinforce or challenge these inequalities. True education

should liberate, not limit; it should empower every child to think, speak, and lead without fear or bias. This methodological framework was designed to ensure both depth and reliability in exploring gender discrimination among adolescent girls. The combination of quantitative data and qualitative narratives captures the complexity of gendered schooling experiences in Srinagar and Budgam. The methodology thus provides a robust foundation for analyzing the intersection of social structures, institutional practices, and individual perceptions that shape gender inequality in education.

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