



ISSN Print: 2664-8679
ISSN Online: 2664-8687
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.33
IJSH 2025; 7(2): 99-103
www.sociologyjournal.net
Received: 07-05-2025
Accepted: 11-06-2025

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A sociological analysis of gender dimensions of education in rural Bihar

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DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26648679.2025.v7.i2b.184>

Abstract

Despite numerous government schemes and efforts to promote universal education, gender disparities continue to persist in rural Bihar. Girls often encounter multiple layers of discrimination that hinder their access to and continuation in formal education. These challenges stem from deeply rooted patriarchal norms, socio-cultural traditions, caste hierarchies, and economic constraints. Additionally, poor infrastructure, absence of female teachers, long travel distances, and safety concerns further exacerbate the situation. This study investigates these gendered dimensions of education through a sociological lens, using qualitative methods such as interviews and field observations in select rural regions of Bihar.

The analysis is grounded in theoretical frameworks such as Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, Walby's theory of patriarchy, and Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality. These perspectives help to understand how social identities like gender, caste, and class intersect to reinforce inequality. The findings indicate that girls from marginalized communities are particularly disadvantaged. Though schemes like Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao and Balika Cycle Yojana exist, their impact is often limited due to weak implementation and societal resistance. The paper concludes with recommendations for gender-sensitive educational reforms, improved infrastructure, and the need for a cultural shift in attitudes toward girls' education to ensure a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape in rural Bihar.

Keywords: Gender inequality, rural education, child education, gender disparity

Introduction

Bihar, one of the most densely populated states in India, has long faced severe socio-economic challenges that have hindered its educational progress. Among the most pressing concerns is the persistently low literacy rate, particularly among women and girls in rural areas. According to census data and various educational surveys, female literacy in Bihar remains among the lowest in the country. This educational backwardness is not merely a result of infrastructural deficiencies but is deeply rooted in a complex web of socio-cultural traditions, gendered power relations, and entrenched caste-based inequalities. In many rural communities, girls are often expected to assume domestic responsibilities at a young age, and their education is seen as a lesser priority compared to that of boys ^[1]. Furthermore, child marriage, gender-based violence, and social restrictions on female mobility further limit educational opportunities for girls, especially from marginalized sections such as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

In recent years, the Government of India has introduced several schemes aimed at improving the educational status of girls, such as Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, Balika Samriddhi Yojana, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, and the Balika Cycle Yojana in Bihar. These initiatives are intended to increase enrollment, retention, and transition rates for girls in schools. However, in practice, their outcomes have been mixed, and many girls continue to remain out of school or drop out before completing their education ^[2]. The reasons for this gap between policy and reality include inadequate awareness among beneficiaries, corruption in the delivery mechanisms, and lack of monitoring, insufficient number of trained female teachers, poor school infrastructure, and the absence of gender-sensitive learning environments. Moreover, deeply entrenched patriarchal values that consider investment in girls' education as non-productive or unnecessary often override any policy-driven incentives. In such a context, it becomes essential to go beyond statistical analyses and adopt

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a sociological approach to understand the lived realities of girls and the multiple barriers they face ^[3].

The central objective of this study is to critically examine the gender disparities in access to, participation in, and completion of formal education among girls in rural Bihar. Using qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews, field observations, and focus group discussions in select rural districts, the study aims to bring forward the voices and experiences of the affected population ^[4]. The analysis is informed by established sociological theories and frameworks. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital helps in understanding how families transmit educational values and aspirations, and how their absence perpetuates disadvantage. Sylvia Walby's theory of patriarchy provides insight into institutional and structural mechanisms that reproduce gender inequality, particularly in the realm of education. Kimberli Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality is used to highlight how caste, class, gender, and regional disparities interlock to further disadvantage certain groups, especially Dalit and Adivasi girls. By applying these frameworks, the study not only seeks to identify and analyze the barriers but also to propose actionable, context-sensitive, and gender-inclusive policy recommendations. These may include strengthening community-based advocacy, training local female educators, ensuring safe school environments, and promoting attitudinal change at the household and community levels ^[5]. Ultimately, the study aspires to contribute to the broader discourse on educational equity and gender justice in India and provide insights that are valuable for policymakers, educators, civil society organizations, and academic researchers working toward a more inclusive educational system in rural Bihar ^[6].

To understand the persistent gender disparities in education in rural Bihar, this study draws upon a triangulated theoretical approach rooted in Feminist Theory, Pierre Bourdieu's Concept of Cultural Capital, and the Social Reproduction Theory of Bowles and Gintis. These frameworks offer a critical lens to analyze not just surface-level inequalities but the deep-rooted structural and ideological mechanisms that reproduce gendered educational disadvantage over time ^[7]. Feminist Theory forms the cornerstone of this analysis by challenging the patriarchal underpinnings of Indian society and its influence on girls' education. It highlights how socially constructed gender roles, rooted in historical and cultural practices, often position women and girls as secondary citizens whose education is considered non-essential or merely functional limited to preparing them for domestic roles. Feminist theorists argue that patriarchy operates not only through overt discrimination but also through the normalization of gendered expectations ^[8]. In rural Bihar, this is evident in societal resistance to girls attending co-educational institutions, concerns about female "purity" and "honor," and the widespread practice of early marriage. Schools themselves may inadvertently reinforce gender norms through curricula, teacher attitudes, classroom dynamics, and lack of gender-sensitive infrastructure. Thus, feminist theory helps in analyzing how both public and private spheres work in tandem to deny girls equitable educational opportunities ^[9].

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of Cultural Capital offers a valuable framework for examining how socio-economic and cultural inequalities manifest within the educational system. According to Bourdieu, students from privileged

backgrounds possess a set of cultural resources language proficiency, exposure to books, familiarity with academic norms that align with the expectations of formal schooling. These students are rewarded with success, while those lacking such capital often from rural, low-income, or marginalized caste backgrounds face exclusion, marginalization, or failure. In the case of girls in rural Bihar, many come from households where parents are either illiterate or have limited exposure to formal education, thereby lacking the ability to support or navigate their daughters' educational journeys. This absence of cultural capital severely limits their ability to adapt to, or benefit from, the existing school system, which remains heavily influenced by middle-class, urban, and often male-centric norms. Bourdieu's idea of symbolic violence is also relevant here it refers to the internalization of social hierarchies and marginalization by the oppressed themselves. Many girls begin to accept their own exclusion from education as natural or deserved, further perpetuating the cycle ^[10].

Social Reproduction Theory, as proposed by Bowles and Gintis, adds another layer of understanding by emphasizing the role of educational institutions in maintaining and reproducing existing social inequalities. Rather than acting as a neutral platform for upward mobility, schools often mirror and legitimize the hierarchical structure of society. In the context of rural Bihar, this theory helps explain how class, caste, and gender-based disadvantages are not only reflected in the classroom but also systematically reinforced. For example, the tracking of students based on performance often correlates with caste and gender, with girls especially from Dalit and marginalized communities frequently placed in lower-performing groups or denied academic encouragement. The lack of representation of female teachers or administrators, caste-based seating practices, and the omission of inclusive content in textbooks all contribute to the reproduction of inequality. According to this theory, the education system becomes a vehicle for transmitting not just knowledge, but also social discipline, obedience to authority, and acceptance of one's "place" in the hierarchy ^[11].

Together, these three theoretical perspectives offer a robust and nuanced framework to interrogate the complex dynamics of gender and education in rural Bihar. While feminist theory sheds light on the gendered norms and roles that inhibit girls' educational participation, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital explains how these disadvantages are compounded by the lack of socio-cultural resources. Social reproduction theory then ties these insights into the functioning of schools as institutions that may actively reinforce, rather than dismantle, inequality. Through this integrated theoretical lens, the study seeks to move beyond descriptive statistics and policy discourse to uncover the deeper social structures that limit girls' access to, retention in, and success within formal education systems in rural Bihar ^[12].

Gender inequality in education in rural Bihar remains a significant social challenge despite several initiatives aimed at improving female literacy and school participation. The Census of India 2011 highlights a stark difference in literacy rates: while 73.4% of males are literate, only 53.3% of females can read and write. This 20% gap is not merely statistical but reflects historical neglect, patriarchal cultural norms, and persistent gender bias in access to education ^[13]. In recent years, government schemes such as the

Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, and incentives like free textbooks, school meals, and uniform subsidies have led to an increase in enrollment of girls at the primary level. Furthermore, the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019–21) shows improvement in gross enrollment ratios for girls, suggesting that the initial hurdle of bringing girls to school is being gradually overcome ^[14].

However, the deeper concern lies in the transition and retention rates. A significant proportion of girls discontinue their education after upper primary or secondary level. The dropout curve is steepest after Class 8 and Class 10, highlighting systemic issues. Enrollment at higher secondary and tertiary levels remains disproportionately low, which has long-term consequences on women's empowerment, employability, and social status. The lack of female representation in higher education perpetuates a cycle of poverty and exclusion, particularly among marginalized castes and tribal communities in Bihar ^[15].

The dropout phenomenon is rooted in a complex web of interrelated socio-economic and cultural factors. Early marriage continues to be a major barrier, especially in rural and semi-urban belts, where girls are often married before they reach the age of 18. Once married, educational aspirations are sidelined, and responsibilities shift toward household duties and child-rearing. Closely linked to this is the burden of household responsibilities that falls disproportionately on girls. In large families, girls are expected to cook, clean, fetch water, care for siblings, and assist in agricultural work, leaving little time or energy for school attendance or studies ^[16].

Safety concerns further deter girls from attending schools, especially when they have to travel long distances or pass through isolated areas. Incidents of harassment, lack of secure transport, and the fear of violence push parents to keep their daughters at home. This concern is particularly acute in conservative or communally sensitive regions. In addition, the lack of proper school infrastructure, especially hygienic, gender-segregated toilets, has a strong impact on the dignity and comfort of adolescent girls ^[17]. Many girls feel embarrassed or are forced to skip school during menstruation due to inadequate facilities or lack of awareness and access to menstrual hygiene products. This periodic absenteeism often leads to eventual dropout. Another layer of complexity is added by caste and class-based discrimination, where lower-caste girls face additional hurdles such as social exclusion, neglect by teachers, and lack of community support ^[18]. These barriers are compounded by parental illiteracy and a general perception that educating girls has low economic returns, especially in families that see daughters primarily as homemakers or burdens to be married off. Addressing the gender gap in rural education in Bihar requires more than infrastructural support. It necessitates a multi-dimensional and intersectional approach one that includes gender sensitization of communities, targeted financial and legal safeguards, improved monitoring of school environments, and flexible education models for adolescent girls, and strong political will to challenge the entrenched socio-cultural hierarchies that continue to deprive rural girls of their right to education ^[19].

In rural Bihar, patriarchal social organization underpins most household decisions, including those related to children's education. Within this structure, sons are

culturally and economically valorized as bearers of lineage and future providers. As a result, boys are more likely to receive sustained investment in education, even when resources are scarce. Daughters, however, are raised with the expectation that they will eventually marry and take up responsibilities within their husband's household, often seen as an economic liability rather than an asset ^[20]. This perception shapes a family's willingness to support a girl's schooling, particularly after puberty. Education for girls is often restricted to basic literacy or primary-level learning, with the assumption that it is sufficient preparation for their "future role" as wives and mothers. In many cases, when the family has to choose between educating a son or a daughter due to limited resources, the son is prioritized. Girls are frequently withdrawn from school to take care of younger siblings, help with domestic chores, or contribute to family income through informal labor. Moreover, the fear that higher education might lead to increased dowry demands or make girls "too independent" results in families pulling girls out of school before they complete secondary or senior secondary levels. These entrenched gender norms, shaped by generations of patriarchal values, perpetuate the cycle of educational deprivation for girls ^[21].

Caste and class hierarchies intersect to further disadvantage girls in marginalized communities. Scheduled Castes (SCs), especially Dalits and Mahadalits, have historically been subjected to socio-economic exclusion, lack of land ownership, and limited access to state services. For families at the bottom of both caste and class hierarchies, day-to-day survival takes precedence over long-term investments like education. This is even more acute for girls, who are perceived as transient members of the household. In extremely poor families, the need for girls to contribute to household income or labor becomes a practical reason for school dropout. Additionally, institutional discrimination within schools such as caste-based seating arrangements, bias from upper-caste teachers, or neglect of SC students discourages attendance. Girls from these backgrounds often face a "triple burden" of being poor, lower-caste, and female ^[22]. Even when enrolled, they are more likely to face ridicule, lack of encouragement, and absence of supportive learning environments. For Muslim girls, who also belong to a socially and economically marginalized community in many parts of Bihar, cultural conservatism may compound the challenges. These overlapping forms of exclusion create a systemic barrier that prevents many girls from ever completing their formal education, despite government schemes and programs intended to support them ^[23].

Religious and cultural practices in rural Bihar can significantly restrict educational access for girls. In several conservative Hindu and Muslim households, norms of female modesty, honor, and restricted mobility are deeply ingrained. Girls are expected to observe decorum in behavior, dress modestly, avoid mixing with boys, and refrain from assertive public expression ^[24]. These expectations are reinforced by community pressure, where any deviation by a girl can bring shame to the family's reputation. As a result, parents often avoid sending their daughters to distant or co-educational schools, especially if there is no reliable transport or female staff ^[25]. Moreover, puberty marks a significant turning point in many girls' lives. Once a girl reaches menstruating age, many families restrict her movement and consider prolonged education unnecessary or even dangerous to her "virtue." In certain

areas, religious leaders and elders may actively discourage the pursuit of secular or modern education for girls, promoting instead religious instruction at home or in madrasas. The fear of moral corruption, sexual harassment, or losing marriage prospects leads many families to curtail educational aspirations for their daughters. While religious teachings may not directly oppose education, cultural interpretations often serve to reinforce regressive practices, thereby contributing to low retention and completion rates among adolescent girls ^[26].

Despite various governmental initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality in education, girls in rural Bihar continue to face numerous institutional and structural barriers that hinder their educational participation and success. One of the most critical obstacles is the poor physical infrastructure in schools, including the lack of functional toilets, inadequate electricity supply, and absence of safe and reliable transport. These basic deficiencies disproportionately affect girls, especially during adolescence, when the absence of gender-sensitive facilities like separate toilets can lead to discomfort, absenteeism, or even permanent dropout from school. Another major issue is the scarcity of female teachers in rural schools. In conservative and patriarchal rural communities, the presence of female teachers often encourages parents to send their daughters to school, as it assures them of a safer and more understanding environment. The lack of women in teaching roles thus contributes significantly to low enrollment and high dropout rates among girls ^[27].

Moreover, the school curricula and pedagogical approaches often remain gender-insensitive. Educational content may perpetuate gender stereotypes or fail to represent women's contributions adequately, reinforcing traditional roles and discouraging girls from aspiring beyond socially assigned boundaries ^[28]. Teachers may also lack adequate training in gender-sensitive teaching methods, leading to biased classroom interactions and reduced confidence among female students. Lastly, while policies such as the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme aim to provide residential schooling to girls from disadvantaged groups, there exists a wide gap between policy formulation and implementation. Many KGBV schools face staff shortages, poor facilities, and inadequate monitoring, undermining the effectiveness of such initiatives. As a result, despite the progressive intent of these schemes, their impact remains limited due to structural inefficiencies and lack of consistent support mechanisms ^[29].

In-depth case studies and field observations from specific districts such as Sitamarhi and Gaya in Bihar reveal the localized and deeply entrenched gender disparities in educational access. These regions serve as microcosms of the broader systemic challenges faced by rural girls in the state ^[30]. In Sitamarhi, for instance, ethnographic surveys highlight that many adolescent girls are withdrawn from school by Class 6 or 7, primarily due to parental concerns about safety and honor. The lack of boundary walls, separate toilets for girls, and long travel distances to upper primary and secondary schools exacerbate these anxieties. Additionally, household responsibilities and seasonal agricultural labor often fall disproportionately on girls, leading to frequent absenteeism and eventual dropout ^[31].

In Gaya district, field research points to stark caste-based discrimination within schools, where girls from Dalit and Mahadalit communities report being asked to sit separately,

discouraged from participation, or overlooked in classroom interactions. Furthermore, the absence of female teachers in many government schools significantly impacts the comfort and confidence levels of adolescent girls, especially in conservative or minority-dominated areas. Local NGO interventions like community learning centers have attempted to bridge these gaps, but they remain limited in scale ^[32]. In an effort to bridge the gender gap in education, several government initiatives have been introduced in rural Bihar to improve girls' access to schooling. Notable among these is the Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana, which provides bicycles to school-going girls, significantly reducing the physical burden of commuting and enhancing enrollment and attendance rates ^[33]. Another key intervention is the establishment of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs) residential schools aimed at facilitating the education of girls from disadvantaged and marginalized communities at the upper-primary level. Additionally, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme has played a vital role in increasing school retention by addressing classroom hunger and incentivizing families to send their daughters to school ^[34].

Despite these promising efforts, numerous challenges persist. Implementation gaps often dilute the effectiveness of such schemes, especially at the grassroots level. Issues such as corruption, bureaucratic delays, and fund leakages compromise the intended impact. Furthermore, these interventions frequently encounter resistance from entrenched patriarchal norms within local communities, which continue to view girls' education as secondary to their domestic and reproductive roles. As a result, while policy frameworks have been laid out with progressive intent, their translation into transformative change remains limited without deeper social reform ^[35].

To address the persistent gender disparities in rural education, a multi-pronged strategy is essential. First and foremost, gender sensitization programs should be integrated at both the school and community levels. These efforts must challenge patriarchal norms, promote the value of girls' education, and actively involve local leaders, teachers, and parents ^[36]. Second, community-based monitoring committees especially those involving women and mothers should be empowered to oversee school functioning and ensure accountability. Strengthening physical infrastructure is also critical: the provision of separate functional toilets for girls, adequate lighting, hostel facilities, and safe school transport can substantially improve enrollment and retention of female students ^[37]. Moreover, expanding scholarships, stipends, and conditional cash transfers for girls pursuing secondary and higher education would reduce the financial burden on families and provide a strong incentive for continued schooling. Equally important is the recruitment and training of more female teachers, who serve as visible role models and help create a more comfortable and inclusive learning environment for girl students. Together, these recommendations aim to transform both the systemic and social conditions that currently hinder girls' education in rural Bihar ^[38].

Gender inequality in education in rural Bihar is not merely an educational concern but a reflection of entrenched patriarchal values, rigid caste hierarchies, and structural socioeconomic disadvantages. The problem is multidimensional, where gender intersects with poverty, caste, and geography to disproportionately exclude girls

from meaningful educational opportunities. While numerous policy interventions like the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs), Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana, and Mid-Day Meal schemes have been introduced, their effectiveness is often compromised by poor implementation, lack of accountability, and limited community participation. Addressing these persistent challenges requires a comprehensive and context-sensitive approach. Policies must be gender-responsive and locally adapted, with mechanisms for transparency and community oversight. Moreover, there is a critical need to reform school infrastructure, curricula, and pedagogical practices to make them more inclusive and empowering for girls. Above all, societal attitudes towards the education of the girl child must undergo a transformative shift. Unless gender perspectives are thoroughly integrated into the broader framework of rural development and educational reform, the goal of achieving equitable and inclusive education in Bihar will remain unattainable, and with it, the broader promise of social justice and empowerment for rural women.

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