



Promoting Inclusivity in Educational Settings: Advancing Gender Equity in Education in Nagaland

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Abstract

This study examines the position of inclusivity in educational settings as a foundational step towards advancing gender equity in education. Gender disparities in academia and career progression continue to impact students, influenced by biased curricula, institutional policies, teaching methods and practices. The present study highlights the significance of creating educational environments which value diversity and foster mutual respect. Strategies promote inclusivity, such as gender-sensitive teaching practices, inclusive school cultures and equitable allocation of resources have been emphasized in the study. Schools that prioritise inclusivity contribute greatly to breaking down gender stereotypes and empower students of all identities to reach their goals. Fostering gender equity is vital in education. Educators, policymakers and stakeholders need to commit to systematic changes to address the biases existing in the educational environments and promote supportive learning for all genders. Setting up a caring and sympathetic ambiance where each individual feels respected, valued, and empowered to bloom academically is vital for promoting social justice and exploiting human potential, accomplishing inclusivity, and gender equity is imperative to various strategies and initiatives to foster gender equity and inclusivity in educational settings. There are barriers and biases in educational institutions. Gender inequity is prevalent in educational environment. There is a call for comprehensive policies and programs that promote gender-sensitive curricula and practices promote positive gender norms, encourage reflections on gender issues among educators and learners, and provide professional development on gender equity and inclusivity.

Keywords: Gender equity, gender inclusivity, educational environments.

1. Introduction

The world today is evolving at a rapid speed, and there is a cry for gender equity in educational settings that resounds more strongly. Numerous steps have been made toward achieving gender equity across the globe within the educational environment. One of the fundamental principles is that education should be a universal right regardless of gender and accessible to all which is yet to be understood and fully realised. There are multifaceted challenges in the attainment of true gender equity causing challenges in the attainment of gender equity within educational spaces that need to be realized and understood. Only then gender equity can be achieved. The present research paper tries to understand the complexities around gender equity and inclusivity in educational environments by probing the various magnitudes of the issue such as societal, psychological, and institutional policies, practices, and biases. The present paper aims to unravel the barriers and explore the strategies that will help in the development of gender policies and the implementation of these policies. The present study seeks to illuminate the pathways towards creating an inclusive environment. Gender equity is a matter of social justice in education and a catalyst

for progress and sustainable development. When all genders are empowered and given equal access to education, it unlocks their potential to foster societal well-being, economic growth, and innovation. An inclusive environment nurtures the educational settings with respect and empathy which helps in the growth of a harmonious and equitable society. The present paper tries to highlight the multifaceted nature of gender equity and inclusivity by examining the existing frameworks, identifying gaps, and proposing some innovative solutions, transforming the educational system into truly equitable and inclusive spaces. The research further endeavours to drop light on the importance of gender equity and inclusivity in the educational environment as a step toward building a prosperous and equitable world.

2. Review of Related Literature

Banerjee, T., & Sharma, R. (2016) ^[2] attempted to study how Women's Cells facilitate gender inclusivity. The study's main findings are: Most emerging countries are besieged by a lack of openness to inclusivity is a key barrier. There is a prerequisite to create and support a gender-inclusive environment and develop it according to the needs. Gender

equity provides a smooth environment for women's development, making them independent. Socio-cultural norms in India are a key issue causing gender barriers in the educational field.

Kumar, J. S., & Shobana, M. D. (2021) ^[4] attempted to study Higher Education in Nagaland: Issues and Challenges. This study uncovered that there are numerous challenges in the field of higher education sector despite its rapid expansion. This study discovered that there are ample opportunities to overcome the challenges. The study suggests certain changes and modifications in the educational system can help to overcome the challenges faced in higher education. The study suggests infrastructural development, updating the curriculum, organize programs for the development of faculties, orientation, and student-centric education may help to a great extent to overcome the challenges in higher education.

Mythiri, B., Anjana Krishna, S., & Karthika, V. K. (2024) ^[7] attempted a study on Indian ESP teacher's classroom practices in fostering social inclusivity. The study's main findings are a scarcity of teachers with teaching tactics to provide a comprehensive educational environment. The study also found that teachers are accountable to provide equal opportunities to students irrespective of their gender.

Eden, C. A., Chisom, O. N., & Adeniyi, I. S. (2024) ^[3] attempted to study Cultural competence in education: strategies for fostering inclusivity and diversity awareness. The study revealed inclusivity can be gained by including cultural diversity in learners, which will also help promote equitable opportunities. For bringing inclusivity through cultural diversity professionally trained teachers who have undergone training and participated in workshops may be more fruitful, the study further suggests that the curriculum must reflect on the policies, commitment, and diversity.

Kuteesa, K. N., Akpuokwe, C. U., & Udeh, C. A. (2024) ^[5] attempted to study gender equity in education, addressing challenges and promoting opportunities for social empowerment. The study found despite progress in the field of education, disproportions in education for girls belonging to marginalized societies continue. Socio-cultural norms, inadequate infrastructure, and economic limitations stand as barriers to education by restricting educational opportunities. Gender stereotypes cause disparities in the choice of subjects and career aspirations. The study suggests scholarships for girls belonging to marginalized communities can alleviate disparities to a great extent. The study further recommends addressing sociocultural norms and designing educational curricula, promoting opportunities for social empowerment, and encouraging girls in non-traditional careers can mitigate the problem.

3. Methodology

The present study is descriptive. Descriptive research anticipates obtaining information regarding the existing phenomena and drawing a favourable conclusion by analyzing the various information collected for the said purpose. It involves a systematic congregation of information collected from various individuals the researcher collected the primary data through the interview method by personally meeting and interviewing 20 stakeholders both male and female from various colleges in the Dimapur and Kohima districts of Nagaland. The process of sampling employed for data collection was purposive sampling. The researcher supplied questionnaires to 30 working women in the higher education sector, collected the information they furnished,

and analysed them thoroughly. The statistical method used for the analysis of the collected data is simple percentages. The researcher constructed the survey tool used to collect primary data. Secondary data was collected from various sources by thoroughly reading various books, and journals online and offline articles. Intensive reading of books, research articles, etc. was done to collect secondary data. To enhance the key data, secondary data was used.

4. Study Objectives

The study's main objectives are:

- i). To study the current challenges faced in educational environment in fostering gender equity and inclusivity.
- ii). To explore teachers role in fostering gender equity and inclusivity
- iii). To study the social-cultural factors affecting the educational environment in fostering gender equity and inclusivity.

4.1. Concept of Inclusivity in Education

An environment where every individual regardless of gender or personal characteristics is welcomed, respected, valued, and supported in the learning journey is termed inclusiveness in education. Inclusivity in education celebrates the diversity of students by acknowledging their identity, race, culture, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic background, and abilities. Inclusivity in education can be associated with social justice and equity, challenging stereotypes and biases within educational institutions nurturing holistic development, and preparing learners to thrive in a diverse and inclusive environment, individuals from various backgrounds come together, sharing unique perspectives and experiences. This fosters creativity and innovation, enhancing collaboration and understanding among team members.

4.2. Concept of Gender Equity in Education

When all individuals regardless of their gender, have equal access, opportunities, and treatment in education, it can be referred to as gender equity in the learning environment. It incorporates myriad aspects such as enrolment, retention, academic performance, eliminating distance barriers, cultural norms, economic limitations, prejudiced practices, and access to all the resources. It involves equal treatment in education such as teaching, grading, discipline, and extracurricular activities. Gender equity in education expects to seek secure and supportive environment where each learner feels secure, respected, valued, and free from violence based on gender. It is the process of being impartial to all individuals.

4.3. Socio-cultural Factors that Foster Gender Equity and Inclusion

Societal norms regarding gender roles and expectations influence the educational environment to a great extent. Challenging stereotypes can foster gender equity in the educational environment. Encouraging families to support their children's education and promoting shared responsibilities irrespective of gender can help contribute to gender equity and inclusivity. Gender-neutral language can be promoted in the learning environment, creating an inclusive environment in learning. Fostering peer relationships by creating prospects for teamwork and collaboration across genders can help foster gender inclusivity and equity. Addressing the sociocultural factors in educational institutions where each student feels appreciated, valued and empowered

to thrive gender equity and inclusivity can be promoted successfully.

5. The Key Findings are Discussed as Follows

Objective 1: To study the current challenges faced in the educational environment in fostering gender equity and inclusivity

From the study, based on analysis of the data, most respondents believed, there is no gender disparity in the educational sector, particularly in Nagaland.

66.60% strongly believed there is no gender disparity in the educational sector in the context of Nagaland. They were not ready to accept the possibility that there might be gender disparity in the state. This reveals that people need greater awareness in this area as they seem to be largely ignorant of the reality. Even though female enrolment has augmented in many stages, there is no denying that disparity on account of gender still remains.

86.60% thought, there is less need for inclusivity in the educational environments in Nagaland. Such a finding also reveals the respondents' lack of sensitivity and awareness. This could be quite alarming because without inclusivity there can be no justice and fairness for all.

Educational policies (RTE Act, NEP 2020, etc) also promote inclusivity at all levels of education.

Most of the respondents were not willing to accept the existence of gender disparity, they also firmly believed there is no requirement for inclusiveness in education which is a key issue.

The study found very few respondents (13.3%) strongly accepted there is gender disparity in educational environment and are aware of the need for inclusivity in the educational environment to foster sustainability.

Two major challenges in the educational environment was found in this study. People are either ignorant or not ready to accept the truth of the existence of gender disparity which is another key issue of unacceptance. Some of the major encounters are the societal norms that dictate roles based on gender may influence educators in their expectations and dealing of students. Boys might be encouraged to excel in subjects like maths and science and girls might be subtly steered towards humanities.

Parental beliefs about gender roles and abilities may inadvertently reinforce gender biases by encouraging certain activities based on the child's gender.

Peer pressure and social dynamics within the classroom can perpetuate gender biases in the classroom.

Objective 2: To explore teachers role in fostering gender equity and inclusivity

This study found female teachers thought teachers must be orientated by conducting workshops and seminars on gender neutrality and inclusivity.

The study highlights that if teachers use gender-inclusive language avoid gender-specific terms and encourage students to respect all genders and identities gender neutrality and inclusiveness can be advanced greatly.

The study brings out that if teachers challenge gender stereotypes through open discussions, gender neutrality and inclusiveness can be achieved in the educational sector.

The study found if teachers foster critical thinking by encouraging students to question societal norms, it can help to obtain gender neutrality and inclusiveness in education.

Teachers need to be trained in inclusivity, how to accept each child with uniqueness in culture, traditions, background and other aspects such as physical deformities, etc

Objective 3: To study the social-cultural factors affecting the educational environment in fostering. Gender equity and inclusivity.

This study found socio-cultural factors has great impact on fostering gender equity and inclusivity in education in Nagaland's context.

Most of the women respondents thought, the main reason for gender biasedness and stereotypes is due to the mental set that is deeply rooted in the minds of women that women are born to serve. Societal norms often dictate specific roles for boys and girls.

This study found that teacher's unconscious biases can have a great influence on the educational institutions

Parental influence and belief about gender roles significantly influence the educational environment.

Most of the female respondents strongly accepted the fact that Nagas is a patriarchal society, women have specific roles and are bound to follow the specified roles.

Traditional customary law of Nagaland has great impact in minds of the people where gender roles are defined as causing gender biases though people strongly speak of 'There are no gender biases in Naga society'

The mindset of tribalism or non-acceptance of people from other tribes causes barriers to inclusivity.

5.1. The Way Forward

Based on the study, it is suggested:

- The institution can implement policies and practices to promote gender neutrality in every aspect such as restrooms, and dress codes.
- Gender-sensitive curriculum and materials that include diverse perspectives on gender identity.
- Endow with professional expansion opportunities such as workshops and symposiums and develop strategies for creating inclusive classrooms.
- Organize workshops on gender neutrality and inclusiveness for parents and guardians and foster positive role models.
- Provide students with decision-making opportunities and express their perspectives on gender issues.
- Offer gender support services depending on students needs such as counselling, mentoring etc.
- Evaluate and monitor the development of the policies and practices.
- The mindset of the stakeholders and acceptability is very crucial to bring sustainability and prosperity to the state through education.
- The infrastructural or physical development of the institution can help to a great extent in fostering gender equity and inclusion in the education sector.
- A paradigm shift in mindset of the people and acceptance of existing gender discrimination can substitute the gender issues.
- Setting up (GIF) gender inclusive fund as per the directives of NEP 2020 can help in building the nation's capacity and provide education to all girls and transgender closing gender gaps in levels of education.

5.2. Way Forward to Create an Inclusive Classroom

Based on the study, it is suggested:

- Create hospitable classroom by making the students feel safe and open psychologically.
- Teachers can be open to their students, take students' suggestions and create an environment of opportunities to share their interests, struggles and objectives.
- Promote teamwork by reassuring students to work jointly on group projects or games collaboratively.
- Provide personalized teaching to help all children.
- Redefine the curriculum into flexible and tailored according to individual needs by employing Universal Design for Learning Principles (UDL)
- Build a diverse curriculum by including a variety of topics in the curriculum.
- Provide openness by ensuring each student can perceive the basic information equally.
- There should not be comparison among students, but focus should be on each child's progress.
- Finally create a calm learning environment by giving clear and precise information.
- Pre-assessment can be used to inform future planning.
- Accommodate and welcome students with disabilities in any manner.
- Identify the barriers and address them.

6. Discussions

The present study uncovers some significant perceptions and challenges such as the majority of the respondents (66.60%) firmly believing that there is no gender disparity in the educational sector which seems to appear that respondents seem dead set against even considering the reality of inequality based on gender. This strong disagreement suggests that there is lack of awareness and people may not distinguish the subtle forms of biases based on gender that persist with educational institutions.

Interestingly, 86.80% of the female respondents, accepted that there was a negligible requirement for inclusivity in educational environments which indicates that there is lack of sensitivity towards the importance of inclusivity which is very alarming and without a guarantee of inclusivity, there can be reinforcement of methodical disparities which can be very challenging to foster an equitable environment. Educational practices presently try to advocate educational policies. However, the respondent's view suggests that education policies may not be embraced or advocated in the present context.

Another noteworthy finding is that only a small fraction of respondents (13.30%) documented the existence of gender discrepancy and the need for inclusivity which reflects a wakefulness of issues which others fail to see can be crucial in initiating a change towards positivity. The study further highlights several root causes for the persistence of gender biases in education such as societal norms around gender roles, parental beliefs and their inadvertent encouragement of gender-based activities, classroom dynamics and peer pressure can perpetuate gender biases which may harm students. The resistance to acknowledging the issues discussed may hinder efforts towards creating an inclusive educational environment in Nagaland.

Study further brings out that most females believe workshops and seminars focused on gender neutrality and inclusivity are the key. These can bring more awareness of unconscious biases and learn strategies for fostering an inclusive environment. The study highlights that open discussions can

encourage critical thinking in students, which teachers can facilitate in classrooms.

The study also highlights an insightful authority of sociocultural factors in the pursuit of gender equity in Nagaland where customary beliefs along with societal outlook appear to shape the attitudes and behaviours of parents, teachers and students. The majority of female respondents of the present study identified a persistent mental framework that is deeply entrenched reflecting gender stereotypes unbreakable by societal norms that women are born to serve with precise roles assigned based on gender which leads to expectations based on gender within the educational settings. Teachers' unconscious biases and parental outlooks for their children indirectly strengthen gender stereotypes by limiting students' capabilities. Tribal identity can also create barriers to inclusivity because of tribalism and the unwillingness to accept individuals from other tribes can limit the efforts to build a truly inclusive educational environment as it impacts the broader social integration which is indispensable for creating a a creative and supporting learning environment.

Educators are fundamental in shaping an inclusive educational culture and there is an urgent prerequisite for training and support to offset these biases. Addressing these issues will not only require awareness but also sustained efforts to shift cultural perceptions, enabling a more inclusive and equitable environment for all.

7. Conclusion

One of the most essential steps towards creating an affluent society is fostering gender equity and inclusion in education which is not just a matter of neutrality but the expansion of sustainability, creating an equitable society. Gender equity in educational environment can be advanced by safeguarding equal access to education. The most important factor here is the acceptance of the existing gender biases in education and the longing for inclusivity in education which begins by ensuring equal educational opportunities, addressing the various socio-cultural barriers causing unfairness, and providing quality education. The curriculum and teaching materials should reflect mixed experiences and outlooks. Students and teachers must promote critical thinking. The most important aspect of fostering gender equity and inclusivity is the accomplishment of policies such as anti-discriminative laws, affirmative action, etc. Achieving gender equity with inclusivity is not a one-man activity but requires the determined activities of various stakeholders and engaging them in various activities, monitoring and evaluating the progress towards gender equity and inclusivity in education. Fostering gender equity and inclusivity is not only a moral imperative but also an intentional investment in building a prosperous society. It must ensure that the full potential of every individual is unlocked and given opportunities equally to all individuals to learn and thrive and create a sustainable society. By addressing the encounters discussed, and promoting inclusive opportunities, a society where each individual regardless of gender with full potential can be promoted.

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