
THE CHANGING SOCIETAL PERCEPTIONS OF GIRLS' EDUCATION IN RURAL INDIA: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Gita Bind¹ and Dr. Ataur Rahman²¹Ph.D Scholar, Department of Sociology, AMU, Aligarh. UP., gitabind1234@gmail.com²Assistant Professor in Sociology, Women's College, AMU, Aligarh, UP, arahman772002@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

Introduction: Education is a crucial step in empowering women, as it enables them to respond to the challenges and obstacles they face, overcome traditional roles, and transform their lives. Women's education plays a significant role in a nation's overall social and economic development. Societal change is evident, as people increasingly wish to educate their girls and see them succeed; however, this is not the case for all rural people. Girls' education, particularly in rural areas, is vital because most of India's population still resides in villages.

Objective: The study examines the changing societal perception of girls' education in rural India. Focusing on how structural and cultural factors shape educational access and acceptance. Methodology: This study utilised secondary data from various published and unpublished records, including magazines, research papers, and articles.

Findings: The findings of the study revealed that girls' education has increased in rural areas, but they continue to face several challenges along the way. Studies have also shown that Socio- economic structures such as caste, class, and culture interplay substantially in deciding access to girls' education.

Suggestions: Without women's education, achieving a prosperous and equitable society is impossible. Although government initiatives and schemes to promote girls' education have shown positive progress. However, the government must take proper initiatives and execute them effectively.

Keywords: rural education, women, societal perception, social change.

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a vital role in shaping the social, cultural, and economic development of any nation. In India, obtaining gender equality and inclusive growth has made girls' education the most critical issue. Rural communities in India used to hold conservative views about women's roles, often preventing women from participating in public life and pursuing an education. However, these perceptions have started to change due to modernisation, awareness campaigns, government initiatives, and policies such as Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and the Right to Education Act (2009), which emphasise universal and gender-inclusive education.

The national female literacy rate in India has increased from 7.3% in 1951 to 65.46%, according to the 2011 census. Although this increase in the female literacy rate is encouraging and promising, there is also an unfortunate flip side to it. The current female literacy rate of India lags behind the male literacy rate. The female education rate in India, at 65.6%, is significantly lower than the world average of 79.7%. The literacy rate among rural India increased from 58.74% (2001) to 68.91% (2011), and among rural females, it increased from 46.13% (2001) to 58.75% (2011), which is lower than the male literacy rate, but the increase in this category is more than that of boys, by almost 5%.

Recent surveys also show encouraging progress. The "State of Elementary Education in Rural India-2022" report, based on the study of 6,229 rural households from across 20 states, was released by Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, according to this study 78% of parents in rural India want their daughters to study at least graduate level education, nearly matching the 82% who want the same for sons (NDTV, Aug 9, 2023). This shift indicates that families are increasingly recognising the importance of educating girls not only for personal empowerment but also for the benefit of their community and social progress. Furthermore, according to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER 2024), the enrolment of girls aged 6–10 in rural India now stands at 98.7 per cent, and for girls aged 11–14, it is 97.8 per cent, and for those aged 15–16, it is 91.1 per cent — a significant improvement from earlier decades. Similarly, findings from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21) indicate that the female literacy rate has increased to 71.5%, compared with 68.4% in the previous NFHS-

4. These figures indicate a positive trend toward gender parity in education.

As yet, many challenges remain. Despite high enrolment, dropout rates remain higher among girls at the secondary level, often due to poverty, early marriage, or lack of safety, and many other challenges. Digital

inequality is another concern—only 19.8 percent of rural girls aged 14–18 own a smartphone, compared with 43.7 percent of boys (Down to Earth, 2024). These disparities demonstrate that while access has expanded, equality in educational experience is still evolving.

From a sociological perspective, this transformation in attitudes reflects broader social change. Durkheim's theory suggests education as both a product and a producer of social transformation, transmitting moral values while reshaping collective beliefs (Lawrence J. Saha, 2001). Ann Oakley's Gender Socialisation Theory further explains how shifting social norms redefine gender roles and expectations. Together, these perspectives help explain how rural India is renegotiating its traditional boundaries—where educating girls is no longer viewed as optional but as essential to family progress and national development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The discourse on girls' education in rural India has been shaped by long-standing socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, and patriarchal traditions. Early literature indicates that rural families historically placed limited value on educating daughters, primarily viewing them through the lens of domestic responsibility, marital obligations, and economic liability (Jain et al., 2016). Cultural notions portraying girls as a "burden," along with expectations of dowry, reinforced the belief that investment in their education would not yield tangible returns. Consequently, rural girls experienced significantly lower levels of schooling, with high dropout rates and restricted access to educational opportunities. Jain et al. (2016) highlight that financial insecurity, safety concerns, distance to schools, household responsibilities, and early marriage collectively contributed to educational discontinuity among girls.

Subsequent studies emphasise that, although traditional barriers persist, notable shifts are emerging in the attitudes of parents and communities toward girls' education. Malwade (2020) notes that, compared to earlier periods, there is a gradual yet visible change in rural families' aspirations, with increasing recognition that education can enhance their daughters' prospects. Nevertheless, this attitudinal transformation remains uneven across regions, partly due to persistent structural limitations such as teacher shortages, multi-grade classrooms, and poor-quality schooling, which influence perceptions about the overall utility of education.

The broader rural education context also informs societal perceptions of gendered access to schooling. Kapur (2018) observes that rural communities are increasingly acknowledging education as a pathway to improved livelihoods and social mobility. However, the educational system in rural areas continues to face significant constraints—limited infrastructure, inadequate transportation, outdated technological resources, and insufficient teacher training—which indirectly affect how families perceive girls' education, particularly in terms of safety and mobility.

Several scholars have examined socio-cultural, economic, and institutional determinants that shape educational opportunities for rural women. Bhandari et al. (1997) and Radiowala and Molwane (2021) argue that gender discrimination, household responsibilities, restrictive cultural practices, and infrastructural deficits collectively impede rural girls' educational participation. Although many rural women express a desire to pursue literacy and skill development, access to these opportunities remains constrained. States such as Kerala and Mizoram, where female literacy rates are markedly higher, demonstrate stronger social support for women's education, suggesting a correlation between literacy levels and more progressive gender attitudes.

A substantial body of literature links changing societal perceptions with the expansion of government interventions aimed at promoting girls' education and empowerment. Shah (2011), in her study of the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) initiative, highlights that residential schooling models offer girls "discursive spaces" that foster self-confidence, agency, and social awareness. These programs challenge traditional expectations and contribute to a gradual shift in family and community attitudes. Similarly, Sherpa and Rymbai (2018) show that initiatives such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Sukanya Samridhi Yojana, various UGC scholarships, and state-specific schemes have significantly improved enrollment and retention rates, while simultaneously altering perceptions regarding girls' capabilities and social roles. Though effective, these efforts are constrained by persistent socio-economic inequalities, gender biases, and early marriage practices that continue to weaken girls' access to sustained education.

Broader community views on the quality and accessibility of schooling also influence perceptions toward education. Poddar and Daine (2025) report that while government programs, such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, have enhanced infrastructure and widened access, concerns remain regarding the adequacy of teacher training, community involvement, and inclusive learning environments. Although their findings are urban-centric, they reflect broader national trends that indirectly shape rural educational attitudes, particularly regarding trust in institutional mechanisms.

Chamuah (2021) further points out that rural women continue to face multiple layers of disadvantage—including low literacy, malnutrition, and limited economic opportunities—that are deeply intertwined with gendered social norms. Education, however, emerges as a transformative force capable of enhancing women's social participation, financial independence, and awareness of rights. Despite this, the rural female literacy rate continues to lag behind urban areas, indicating that substantial socio-cultural barriers remain in place.

Many NGOs, such as Educate Girls, Pratham, CRY (Child Rights and You), and Save the Children India, also focus on girls' education to raise awareness about the importance of education and increase school enrollment. Over the years, it has become evident that these factors have increased, while traditional norms are also declining; however, not all challenges have been resolved. Despite these, the results of NGOs are positive and show.

Overall, existing literature demonstrates a gradual but significant shift in societal perception—from viewing girls' education as unnecessary to recognising it as a tool for empowerment and social transformation. Policy interventions, socioeconomic changes, and increased awareness have facilitated this shift. However, the change is neither uniform nor complete; entrenched patriarchal norms, infrastructural deficits, and socio-economic disparities continue to shape educational outcomes. While extensive research exists on barriers and policy impacts, a noticeable gap remains in sociological studies that specifically analyse the qualitative nature of perceptual change within rural households. The present study aims to address this gap by synthesising secondary data to examine how and why these perceptions are evolving in rural India.

OBJECTIVE

- To examine the changing societal perception of girls' education in rural India
- To analyse the role of structural and cultural factors that shape educational access and acceptance

METHODOLOGY

This study is entirely based on secondary sources. Data have been collected from published and unpublished sources, including Census Data, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS- 5), the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER-2024), research journals, and reports from NGOs. The study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach to understand changing societal perceptions of girls' education in rural India. As the study relies on secondary sources, it does not involve fieldwork or the collection of primary data.

FINDINGS /RESULTS

Literacy rate

According to the 2011 census, the total rural education in India was 68.9 percent, in rural women, 58.8 percent (male 78.6%). In contrast, the national average female literacy rate was

65.46 percent, and in the 2001 census, it was 46.1 percent (males, 70.7%). The national average for both years was 53.7%. In comparison to the 2001 census, the rural female literacy rate has increased by 12.7 per cent, which is higher than that of urban females (7.0%). The gender gap in literacy has decreased from 24.6% in 2001 to 19.8% in 2011 in rural areas, and from 13.4% to 9.8% in urban areas. NFHS-5 (2019-21) data show that the proportion of literate women aged 15-49 years in rural areas has increased from 61.5% NFHS-4 (2015-16) to 65.9% in NFHS-5 (2019-21).

Educational attainment at the household level increased between 2015-16 and 2019-21. Among females, the median number of years of schooling increased from 4.4 years in NHFS- 4 (2015-16) to 4.9 years in NHFS-5 (2019-21). The median number of years of education completed by males increased from 6.9 years in NHFS-4 to 7.3 years in NHFS-5. Over the same period, the percentage of females and males with no schooling decreased from 31% of females and 15% of males to 28% of females and 14% of males.

Among both females and males, the median number of years of schooling is higher in urban areas than in rural areas (7.5 years versus 4.0 years among females and 8.8 years versus 6.5 years among males).

Enrolment rate

According to ASER 2024, enrolment in pre-primary education in rural India has increased steadily, showing that parents are beginning to value early schooling more than before. Enrolment among 3-year-olds rose from 68.1 per cent in 2018 to 77.4 per cent in 2024, among 4-year-olds from 76 per cent to 83.4 per cent, and among 5-year-olds from 58.4 per cent to 71.4 per cent, with several states recording an enrolment rate of over 90 per cent. At the elementary level (6–14 years), enrollment has remained above 95 percent for nearly two decades, reflecting that education has become a social norm in rural society. Government school enrolment rose during the pandemic but declined again by 2024, showing shifting parental preferences and economic pressures.

Sociologically, while these figures indicate wider access and growing acceptance of schooling, the simultaneous rise in dropout at higher levels suggests that structural barriers, poverty, and social responsibilities still limit long-term educational continuity for many rural children, especially girls.

The report shows that reading skills also increased in the 5-16 age group, but not to the same standards as those of a typical 3rd-grade student in the government. School 2024: At least 23.4% of students read the 2nd-grade level text—comparable to the percentage of children who can read standard 2-level text, by grade and sex. In Standard 3, boys are 20.4% and girls are 20.5% as of 2022. In the same standard, boys are 26% and girls are 28.1% in 2024, referring to students in Standard 5 and Standard 8 in 2022 who can read texts at the Standard 2 level. Boys are 41.2% and 67.6%, and in 2024, the percentages are 46.8% and 68.7%. Girls are 44.3%

(std 5), 71.3% (std 8) in 2022, and 50.6% (std 5), 73.2% (std 8) in 2024. The ASER Report indicates that, while the number of student enrolments is increasing, the quality of education is not improving. When a student base is weak, students struggle to perform well in further studies and often face various problems. That's why it is more necessary to improve rural education.

NFHS-5 data show a steady improvement in girls' educational participation in rural India. The proportion of rural females aged six years and above who have ever attended school increased from 63 per cent in NFHS-4 to 66.8 per cent in NFHS-5. Similarly, the share of rural women completing ten or more years of schooling increased from 27.3% to 33.7%, indicating improved educational continuity. However, inequality becomes visible at higher levels of education. While the Net Attendance Ratio (NAR) at the primary level is the same in both rural and urban areas (83 percent), it is higher in urban areas at the secondary level (76 percent compared to 70 percent in rural areas).

Economic status strongly influences attendance. Among the poorest households, only 57 percent of girls attend secondary school, compared to 83 percent in the richest group. Gross Attendance Ratios exhibit similar trends, with wealthier households and urban children showing better participation rates. Children from Scheduled Tribes record the lowest secondary-level attendance, showing how caste, class, gender, and location together shape educational inequality in rural India.

Gender parity rate

NFHS-5 data on school attendance among children aged 6–17 years in rural India show that participation is high at the primary level but gradually declines with age, with gender differences becoming more visible. Among children aged 6–10 years, attendance is almost universal, with 95% of boys and 94% of girls in school, indicating substantial gender parity at the primary level. In the 11–14 age group, attendance drops slightly to 91 percent for boys and 89 percent for girls, suggesting the beginning of a gender gap during the middle school years. The decline becomes sharper in the 15–17 age group, where attendance falls to 70 percent for boys and 64 percent for girls, reflecting higher dropout rates among adolescent girls due to early marriage, domestic responsibilities, economic pressures, and limited access to nearby secondary schools.

ASER 2024 findings support this pattern. While parity remains strong up to early adolescence, a noticeable gap appears in the 15–16 age group, where 8.1 percent of girls are out of school compared to 7.7 percent of boys. Sociologically, this indicates that although access has improved, deeper-seated gender norms continue to influence girls' educational continuity, underscoring the need for targeted policies to retain rural girls in secondary education.

Dropout rates among girls

The percentage of girls "Not in School" represents the dropout or out-of-school rate. The data indicate that the dropout rate among females increases with age. While only 1.2% of girls aged 7–10 years are not attending school, the figure rises to 2.1% for girls aged 11–14 years, and further escalates to 8.1% among girls aged 15–16 years. The proportion of 15-16-year-old children who are not enrolled in school dropped sharply from 13.1% in 2018 to 7.9% in 2024 at the all-India level; however, the proportion of girls not enrolled has increased slightly from 7.9% in 2022 to 8.1% in 2024. Although several states, where girls have not enrolled in more than 10%, include M.P. (16.1%), U.P. (15%), Rajasthan (12.7%), Mizoram (12.2%), Gujarat (10.5%), and Chhattisgarh (10%) (ASER report 2024). This pattern highlights a progressive decline in school retention as girls move to higher age groups, possibly due to socio-economic, cultural, or infrastructural factors.

Access to school infrastructure and safety

The ASER 2024 report indicates modest improvements in school infrastructure since 2018, following the implementation of the Right to Education Act. The proportion of schools with usable girls' toilets increased from 66.4% to 72%, while access to drinking water rose from 74.8% to 77.7%. The use of books beyond

textbooks also increased from 36.9 percent to 51.3 percent, suggesting some improvement in learning resources. However, progress remains uneven, with states such as Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Nagaland showing weaker facilities, and sports infrastructure remaining essentially unchanged. Sociologically, inadequate infrastructure and safety concerns in rural areas strongly influence parental decisions. A lack of secure environments, transportation, and basic amenities discourages girls from continuing their education, particularly during the adolescent stage, thereby affecting enrollment, retention, and educational equality. Families are more likely to support girls' education when schools provide a secure environment and basic facilities. Hence, improved infrastructure and safety measures play a crucial role in enhancing enrolment and retention of rural girls in educational institutions.

Rural girls' education and changing attitudes

Recent data from national surveys indicate that parental attitudes and goals for the education of rural girls in India are improving. ASER (2024) states that overall enrollment among children in rural regions between the ages of 6 and 14 remains high, at over 97%. This indicates that most parents now consider education a fundamental requirement for both boys and girls.

The ASER 2024 report indicates a gradual improvement in school infrastructure and learning levels in rural India, with a notable benefit to girls. The number of usable girls' toilets increased from 66.4% in 2018 to 72% in 2024, which positively influences parents' willingness to educate their daughters. Learning outcomes have also improved slightly, as evidenced by the increase in Class III students able to perform subtraction, from 25.9% in 2022 to 33.7% in 2024. NFHS-5 data further reveal social progress, with women aged 15–49 who have completed ten or more years of schooling increasing from 24.6% to 36%, while the prevalence of early marriage declined from 32% to 27%. These changes reflect shifting parental attitudes, growing recognition of the value of education in empowerment, and the influence of policy, media, and NGO efforts. However, class, caste, economic barriers, safety concerns, and distance to secondary schools continue to hinder girls' educational continuity, especially in remote rural areas.

Government programs and policies roles

The Government of India has helped improve girls' education in rural areas through many schemes and policies. Programs such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, and the National Education Policy 2020 have increased girls' school enrollment and reduced gender gaps. According to ASER 2024, girls' attendance and learning levels in rural schools have improved over time. Facilities such as mid-day meals, free books, uniforms, and scholarships have made it easier for low-income families to send their daughters to school. NFHS-5 data also show that female literacy has increased. Overall, these efforts have not only improved access to education but have also gradually changed how rural families perceive the importance of educating girls.

Persistent Challenges

Despite the progress, challenges remain. According to NFHS-5, only 24% of rural women (aged 15–49) have completed 12 years or more of schooling. Lack of access to digital education, inadequate transportation facilities, and cultural constraints, such as early marriage, continue to hinder educational advancement for many.

While the data highlight progress, they also show that structural inequalities persist. True gender equality in education will require not only access to schooling but also a more profound cultural change that values women's autonomy and independence.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that literacy rates among rural girls have steadily increased, indicating a positive shift in the value assigned to girls' education. Enrolment ratios show a narrowing gender gap at the primary and upper-primary levels, especially in areas where targeted awareness campaigns are being implemented. However, dropout rates remain high during the transition from primary to secondary education due to enduring social norms related to early marriage and household responsibilities. Gender Parity Index improvements demonstrate progress but highlight persistent inequalities in some districts. Parental interviews reveal a generational shift, where older family members remain skeptical, while younger parents express higher educational aspirations for their daughters. Safety and infrastructure concerns, such as inadequate facilities for girls and long distances to schools, continue to negatively influence societal attitudes. Government programs have played a crucial role in increasing enrolment and retention by creating awareness and providing financial incentives.

Most NGOs agree that rural girls' education in India is improving but requires stronger support systems to achieve real, long-lasting change. While primary-level progress is encouraging, secondary and higher education still lag due to social norms and inadequate infrastructure. To ensure meaningful progress, communities,

families, and schools must collaborate to create a safe, supportive, and equitable environment where rural girls can complete their education and reach their full potential.

CONCLUSION

Societal perceptions of girls' education in rural India have undergone a progressive improvement, facilitated by increased awareness, policy interventions, and shifting economic realities. Despite this positive outlook, challenges such as dropout rates and infrastructural deficits persist. Focused efforts to address these barriers will be essential for sustaining educational growth and empowering rural girls.

SUGGESTIONS

- Strengthen awareness programs to change traditional gender attitudes in rural areas.
- Encourage parental involvement in girls' education through community meetings.
- Improve the quality of education in rural schools.
- Provide safe transportation facilities for girls to reduce dropouts.
- Increase scholarships and financial incentives for rural girls.
- Appoint more female teachers in rural schools to ensure comfort and safety.

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