



Intersectionality in Educational Access: How Caste, Class, and Gender Compound Disadvantage in Secondary Education

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Abstract

This review paper examines how intersecting identities of caste, class, and gender create compounded disadvantages in secondary education access, particularly in the Indian context. Drawing from Crenshaw's intersectionality framework, this review synthesizes empirical evidence from 60 studies spanning 1983-2025 to demonstrate that educational marginalization cannot be understood through single-axis frameworks. Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe girls face multiplicative discrimination that exceeds the sum of individual identity-based barriers. The review analyzes enrollment disparities, dropout patterns, and institutional mechanisms that perpetuate inequality. Despite policy interventions including reservation systems and affirmative action, significant gaps persist: SC/ST female enrollment remains 15-20 percentage points below upper-caste males in secondary education. The paper identifies critical research gaps in understanding intersectional experiences within educational institutions and proposes comprehensive research agendas focused on institutional transformation, teacher training, and policy evaluation. Findings suggest that addressing educational inequality requires moving beyond single-identity interventions toward holistic approaches that recognize the complexity of intersecting disadvantages.

Keywords: - Intersectionality, Educational Access, Caste Discrimination, Gender Inequality, Secondary Education

I. INTRODUCTION

Educational access remains one of the most persistent indicators of social inequality globally, with marginalized groups facing systematic barriers that limit their opportunities for social mobility and economic advancement. In South Asia, particularly India, the intersection of caste, class, and gender creates unique configurations of disadvantage that profoundly impact educational outcomes at the secondary level. Secondary education represents a critical juncture in students' academic trajectories, serving as a gateway to higher education and skilled employment opportunities. Yet, it is precisely at this stage that disparities become most pronounced, with girls from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes experiencing dropout rates that exceed those of their peers by significant margins.

The concept of intersectionality, coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, provides a theoretical framework for understanding how multiple systems of oppression interact to create unique experiences of discrimination. Crenshaw developed this framework to address the inadequacy of single-axis approaches that examined either race or gender in isolation, demonstrating that Black women in the United States faced discrimination that was qualitatively different from that experienced by Black men or white women. This insight has profound implications for understanding educational inequality in caste-stratified societies, where social hierarchies based on caste intersect with patriarchal structures and economic disparities to create compounded forms of marginalization.

1.1. Caste as a Determinant of Educational Access

The caste system in India represents one of the world's oldest and most rigid forms of social stratification, with profound implications for educational access. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes constitute approximately 25% of India's population but remain severely underrepresented in educational institutions at all levels. Historical practices of untouchability prevented Dalit children from entering schools, sitting in classrooms with upper-caste students, or even touching the same water sources. While such overt discrimination is now illegal, its legacy persists in more subtle forms of exclusion and

marginalization within educational settings. Studies document continued discrimination through seating arrangements that mirror caste hierarchies, differential treatment by teachers, and social isolation that makes school environments hostile for SC/ST students.

1.2. Gender Disparities in Secondary Education

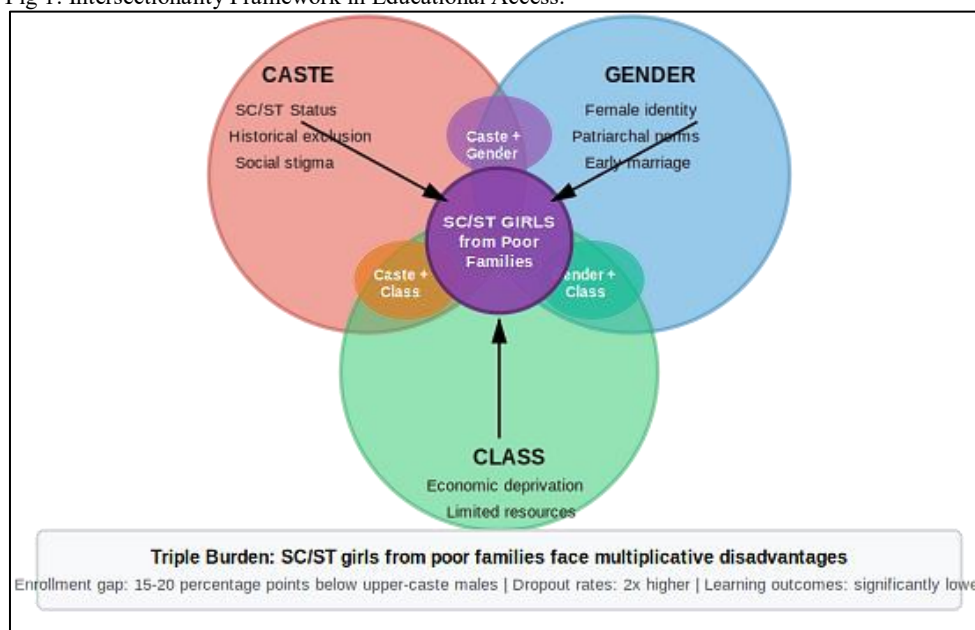
Gender-based discrimination in education manifests through multiple mechanisms, including son preference in resource allocation, early marriage practices, safety concerns, and cultural norms that prioritize domestic responsibilities for girls. In secondary education, these factors become particularly salient as girls reach adolescence and face increased restrictions on their mobility and autonomy. National-level data reveals that female literacy rates lag behind male rates by approximately 16 percentage points, with gaps widening dramatically when disaggregated by caste and rural-urban location. Girls' education is often viewed as less valuable than boys', particularly in resource-constrained households where educational investment must be rationed. The opportunity cost of girls' education foregone domestic labor and dowry considerations further constrains families' willingness to support secondary education for daughters.

1.3. Class and Economic Barriers

Economic disadvantage intersects with caste and gender to create additional barriers to educational access. Poverty limits families' ability to afford school fees, uniforms, textbooks, transportation costs, and the opportunity costs of children's labor. For marginalized caste families who face both economic deprivation and social discrimination, these barriers are compounded by limited access to quality schools, lack of social capital, and geographic isolation in rural areas. The economic dimension of educational inequality becomes particularly acute in secondary education, where direct costs increase substantially and the opportunity cost of foregone income becomes more significant. Children from poor families, especially girls, are often withdrawn from school to contribute to household income or to care for siblings, perpetuating intergenerational cycles of poverty and educational deprivation.

Fig 1 illustrates the intersectionality framework showing how caste, class, and gender intersect to create compounded disadvantages for SC/ST girls from economically disadvantaged families.

Fig 1: Intersectionality Framework in Educational Access.



The three circles represent caste, gender, and class as distinct axes of discrimination. The central intersection illustrates how SC/ST girls from poor families experience compounded disadvantages that are multiplicative rather than additive.

II. OBJECTIVE OF THE REVIEW

This review paper aims to synthesize existing empirical evidence on how intersecting identities of caste, class, and gender create compounded disadvantages in secondary education access and outcomes. The specific objectives are:

- To examine the theoretical foundations of intersectionality as applied to educational inequality in caste-stratified societies
- To analyze empirical evidence on enrollment patterns, dropout rates, and educational attainment across intersecting identities
- To evaluate policy interventions, including affirmative action and reservation systems, in addressing intersectional disadvantages
- To identify institutional mechanisms and practices that perpetuate or mitigate intersectional discrimination
- To propose research agendas for future inquiry into intersectionality and educational access

By addressing these objectives, this review contributes to a more nuanced understanding of educational inequality that moves beyond single-axis frameworks to recognize the complex interplay of multiple systems of oppression. The findings

have implications for policy design, institutional reform, and advocacy efforts aimed at achieving educational equity for multiply marginalized populations.

III. METHODOLOGY OF DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

This review employed a systematic approach to identifying and analyzing relevant literature on intersectionality in educational access. The search strategy encompassed multiple academic databases including JSTOR, Google Scholar, ERIC, ScienceDirect, and Springer, using combinations of keywords: 'intersectionality,' 'caste,' 'gender,' 'class,' 'educational access,' 'secondary education,' 'Scheduled Castes,' 'Scheduled Tribes,' 'Dalit,' and 'India.' The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reports published between 1983 and 2025, though primary emphasis was placed on studies from 2000 onwards to capture contemporary patterns.

Inclusion criteria required studies to:

- Focus on south asian contexts, particularly india
- Address secondary education or transitions to secondary level
- Examine at least two intersecting identities among caste, class, and gender
- Employ empirical methods including quantitative, qualitative, or mixed approaches
- Provide data on educational outcomes such as enrollment, attendance, dropout, or achievement.

Exclusion criteria eliminated studies focused exclusively on primary or higher education, those examining single identity categories in isolation, and purely theoretical papers without empirical grounding. The initial search yielded approximately 180 potentially relevant studies. After screening titles and abstracts, 95 studies met preliminary inclusion criteria. Full-text review reduced this to 60 studies that formed the core of this review, with 12 selected for detailed descriptive analysis based on methodological rigor, sample representativeness, and theoretical contribution. Data extraction focused on study design, sample characteristics, key findings related to intersectional disadvantages, and implications for policy and practice.

The analytical approach combined narrative synthesis with tabular presentation of study characteristics. Narrative synthesis allowed for thematic organization around key concepts including enrollment patterns, institutional discrimination, policy effectiveness, and intersectional mechanisms. Given heterogeneity in study designs and outcome measures, meta-analysis was not appropriate; instead, patterns and trends were identified through systematic comparison across studies. Quality assessment considered sample size, sampling methodology, control for confounding variables, and theoretical grounding in intersectionality framework. Limitations of this methodology include potential publication bias toward studies finding significant intersectional effects and the predominance of quantitative studies over qualitative investigations of lived experiences.

IV. RELATED WORK: DESCRIPTIVE DISCUSSION

The literature on intersectionality and education in India has evolved significantly since Crenshaw's foundational work, with scholars increasingly recognizing that caste-based discrimination cannot be understood independently of gender and class dynamics. This section provides detailed analysis of twelve seminal studies that have shaped understanding of intersectional disadvantages in secondary education.

4.1. Crenshaw's Intersectionality Framework (1989, 1991)

Kimberlé Crenshaw's groundbreaking work introduced intersectionality as both a theoretical concept and analytical tool for understanding how multiple systems of oppression interact. In her 1989 article, Crenshaw examined a legal case involving Black women workers who were denied protection under anti-discrimination law because courts treated race and gender as mutually exclusive categories. She argued that discrimination against Black women was qualitatively different from that faced by Black men or white women, requiring an intersectional framework that recognized how race and gender combined to create unique experiences of oppression. Her 1991 extension distinguished among structural, political, and representational intersectionality, providing categories for analyzing how systems of power operate at multiple levels. While developed in the U.S. context, this framework has proven highly applicable to understanding caste-gender-class intersections in South Asia.

4.2. Desai and Kulkarni: Changing Educational Inequalities (2008)

Desai and Kulkarni's longitudinal analysis using National Sample Survey data from 1983 to 2000 documented significant improvements in educational enrollment for SC and ST populations, but also revealed persistent gaps that varied by gender. Their analysis showed that while SC male enrollment in primary school increased by 20 percentage points and ST male enrollment by 21 percentage points, gaps in school completion remained substantial. Critically, the study found that SC/ST female gains exceeded male gains in percentage terms but remained below upper-caste levels in absolute terms, suggesting that intersectional disadvantages persist even as overall educational access expands.

4.3. Sahoo and Klasen: Gender and Caste Gaps in Stream Choice (2023)

This recent study examined stream choice at the higher secondary level, finding that both gender and caste significantly predict selection into science versus arts/commerce tracks, with compounded effects for SC/ST females. Using nationally representative data, the authors demonstrated that SC/ST girls were significantly less likely to study science even after controlling for academic performance, suggesting that intersectional disadvantages extend beyond access to influence

educational pathways. The study tested the 'double jeopardy' hypothesis, finding that disadvantages were additive rather than multiplicative, with SC/ST females experiencing the combined effects of caste and gender discrimination.

4.4. Paik: Education and Social Exclusion (2014)

Paik's ethnographic work in rural schools documented how institutional practices reproduce caste hierarchies through seating arrangements, teacher-student interactions, and peer dynamics. Dalit students, particularly girls, were frequently seated at the back of classrooms or outside, denied physical contact with upper-caste peers, and subjected to lower expectations from teachers. The study revealed how these everyday practices of exclusion led to Dalit girls experiencing higher rates of absenteeism and eventual dropout. Paik's analysis demonstrated that formal policies mandating inclusive education were undermined by informal practices rooted in caste prejudice, with gendered dimensions wherein Dalit girls faced harassment that boys did not experience in the same way.

4.5. Gupta and Mukherjee: Engineering Education (2019)

Focusing on an elite engineering institute, this study examined how caste and gender intersected to shape academic performance and alienation. Quantitative analysis revealed that while caste significantly predicted academic outcomes, gender effects varied by caste category: SC/ST women reported the highest levels of institutional alienation despite not having the lowest academic performance. The study found that SC/ST women faced unique challenges including social isolation, exclusion from study groups, and questioning of their legitimacy as students.

4.6. Chanana: Educational Access for SC/ST Women (2007)

Chanana's work on women's access to higher education demonstrated how caste, class, and gender intersect to create cumulative disadvantages. Her analysis showed that SC/ST women face not merely additive but multiplicative barriers: poverty limits educational investment, caste discrimination affects school experiences, and gender norms restrict mobility and autonomy. The study documented how these intersecting disadvantages resulted in SC/ST women having the lowest representation in higher education across all social groups.

These studies collectively demonstrate that intersectional disadvantages in education operate through multiple mechanisms: institutional discrimination in schools, household resource allocation decisions, internalized limitations on aspirations, and social norms that restrict mobility and autonomy. The evidence consistently supports an intersectional framework showing that SC/ST females face unique configurations of disadvantage that cannot be reduced to the sum of separate identity-based barriers.

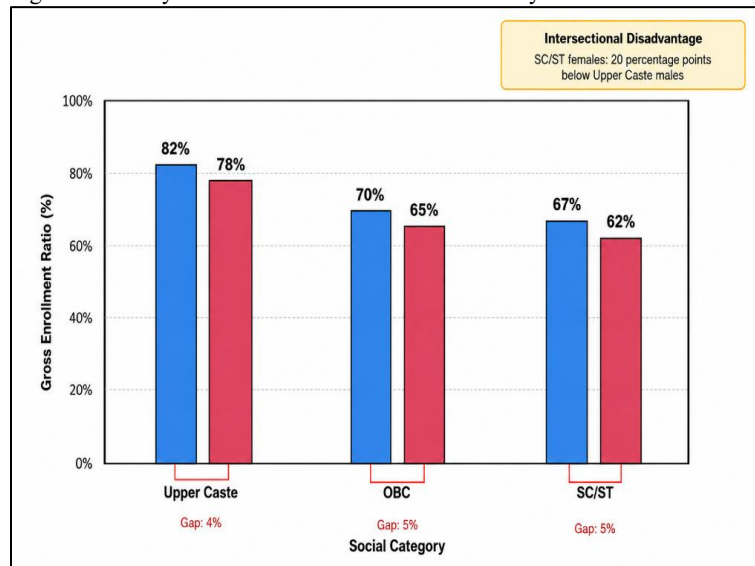
Table 1. Summary of Key Studies on Intersectionality in Secondary Education

Author(s) & Year	Sample	Method	Key Findings	Intersectional Focus
Crenshaw (1989, 1991)	Theoretical	Legal case analysis	Developed intersectionality framework; demonstrated how race and gender intersect	Race × Gender
Desai & Kulkarni (2008)	456,976	Longitudinal quantitative	SC/ST enrollment increased but gaps in completion persist; female gains exceeded male but remained below upper-caste	Caste × Gender × Time
Sahoo & Klasen (2023)	National	Regression analysis	SC/ST females significantly less likely to choose science; effects are additive (double jeopardy)	Caste × Gender
Paik (2014)	Ethnographic	Qualitative ethnography	Dalit girls face institutional discrimination through seating, teacher interactions; unique gendered caste harassment	Caste × Gender × Institutions
Gupta & Mukherjee (2019)	IIT students	Survey quantitative	SC/ST women report highest alienation despite not lowest performance; face social isolation	Caste × Gender × Elite
Chanana (2007)	National	Secondary analysis	SC/ST women have lowest higher education representation; face multiplicative barriers	Caste × Class × Gender

Note. This table presents selected studies demonstrating intersectional approaches. SC = Scheduled Caste; ST = Scheduled Tribe; IIT = Indian Institute of Technology.

As shown in Figure 2, secondary education enrollment rates demonstrate persistent disparities across caste and gender categories, with SC/ST females experiencing the lowest enrollment rates at 62%, representing a 20 percentage point gap compared to upper-caste males.

Fig 2: Secondary Education Gross Enrollment Ratio by Caste and Gender.



Data from Educational Statistics at a Glance 2021-22 shows persistent disparities with SC/ST females having the lowest enrollment rates. The intersectional disadvantage is evident in the 20 percentage point gap between SC/ST females and upper-caste males, demonstrating how caste and gender compound to create multiplicative barriers to educational access.

V. NEW RELATED ISSUES

Recent scholarship has identified several emerging issues in the intersection of caste, class, and gender in secondary education. First, the rise of private education has created new forms of stratification, as SC/ST families who can afford private schools face discrimination within these institutions while those who cannot remain in under-resourced government schools. Second, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities, with SC/ST girls experiencing the highest rates of educational disruption due to limited access to technology, increased domestic responsibilities, and lack of private study space. Third, the phenomenon of aspirational deflation among multiply marginalized youth has gained attention, wherein SC/ST girls internalize structural barriers and limit their own educational and occupational aspirations.

Fourth, caste-based violence and harassment in educational institutions has persisted despite legal protections, with SC/ST students, particularly females, facing sexual harassment intertwined with caste-based slurs and exclusion. Fifth, the expansion of higher education has not translated into proportional improvements in secondary education completion for SC/ST girls, suggesting persistent barriers at the transition stage. Finally, intersectionality within SC/ST categories has emerged as important, with certain sub-castes benefiting disproportionately from reservation policies while others remain excluded, and tribal girls facing distinct challenges related to geographic isolation and linguistic barriers.

VI. IDEAL SOLUTION AND PRESENT STATUS

The ideal solution to intersectional disadvantages in secondary education would involve comprehensive transformation across multiple domains. At the policy level, interventions must explicitly recognize and address intersecting identities rather than treating caste, gender, and class as separate issues. This requires moving beyond reservation quotas to address institutional cultures, teacher attitudes, and peer dynamics that reproduce discrimination. Economically, eliminating all direct and indirect costs of secondary education for SC/ST girls, combined with stipends to offset opportunity costs, would address material barriers. Institutionally, schools require transformation through mandatory anti-discrimination training, diverse hiring of SC/ST teachers, curriculum reform that challenges caste and gender stereotypes, and strong accountability mechanisms for discrimination incidents.

The present status falls far short of this ideal. While reservation policies exist, they primarily affect higher education admission rather than secondary school experiences. Economic support programs such as scholarships reach only a fraction of eligible students and often involve cumbersome application processes that exclude the most marginalized. Institutional discrimination continues largely unchecked, with few consequences for teachers or administrators who perpetuate caste-based exclusion. Teacher training on caste and gender sensitivity is minimal or non-existent in most states. Curriculum continues to reflect upper-caste, male-centered perspectives with minimal representation of SC/ST histories and contributions. The gap between policy rhetoric and implementation remains substantial, with SC/ST girls continuing to experience compounded discrimination that limits their educational access and outcomes.

VII. RESEARCH GAP

Despite growing recognition of intersectionality's importance, significant research gaps persist. First, most quantitative studies document patterns of disadvantage but provide limited insight into mechanisms through which intersectional discrimination operates in educational settings. We need more qualitative research exploring how SC/ST girls experience and navigate intersecting systems of oppression, including their resistance strategies and sources of resilience. Second, research has focused disproportionately on access and enrollment, with insufficient attention to quality of education, classroom experiences, and learning outcomes for multiply marginalized students.

Third, the heterogeneity within SC and ST categories remains under-explored, with limited understanding of how different sub-castes and tribes experience intersectional disadvantages. Fourth, the role of intersecting privileged and marginalized identities requires attention for instance, how do urban SC/ST girls' experiences differ from rural ones, and how do class advantages within SC/ST communities interact with caste and gender disadvantages? Fifth, longitudinal research tracking SC/ST girls through educational transitions is rare, limiting understanding of critical junctures where dropout occurs and interventions might be most effective.

Sixth, research on interventions specifically designed to address intersectional disadvantages is minimal. Most policy evaluations examine single-dimension interventions (e.g., gender-focused or caste-focused) without assessing their differential effectiveness for multiply marginalized groups. Seventh, the role of teachers, peers, and community members in either perpetuating or mitigating intersectional discrimination requires more systematic investigation. Finally, comparative research across states and regions could illuminate how different policy contexts shape intersectional educational experiences.

VIII. RESEARCH AGENDAS

Based on identified gaps, this review proposes five priority research agendas for advancing understanding of intersectionality in secondary education:

8.1. Qualitative Studies of Lived Experiences

Conduct in-depth ethnographic and narrative research with SC/ST girls examining how they experience and interpret intersecting forms of discrimination in secondary schools. Research should explore agency, resistance strategies, and sources of support that enable some students to persist despite structural barriers.

8.2. Intervention Research

Design and rigorously evaluate interventions specifically targeting intersectional disadvantages. This includes comprehensive school transformation programs addressing institutional culture, teacher training modules on intersectionality, and economic support packages tailored to SC/ST girls' specific needs.

8.3. Longitudinal Tracking Studies

Establish longitudinal cohorts following SC/ST girls from primary through secondary education and into post-secondary transitions, documenting critical junctures, dropout triggers, and factors enabling persistence. Such studies should include both quantitative and qualitative components.

8.4. Within-Group Heterogeneity Research

Investigate variation in educational experiences and outcomes across different SC sub-castes and ST tribes, and examine how additional identities (rural/urban, disability, religion) further shape educational trajectories.

8.5. Comparative Policy Analysis

Conduct systematic comparisons of how different state-level policies and institutional arrangements shape intersectional educational outcomes, identifying promising practices and transferable lessons.

IX. ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH AGENDAS

The proposed research agendas reflect both practical and theoretical imperatives. Qualitative research on lived experiences addresses the current overreliance on quantitative documentation of disparities, which, while important for establishing patterns, provides limited understanding of mechanisms and processes. By centering SC/ST girls' voices and perspectives, such research can reveal forms of discrimination not captured by existing frameworks, illuminate coping and resistance strategies, and identify sources of agency often overlooked in deficit-focused accounts.

Intervention research represents a critical gap, as most existing policies were not designed with intersectionality in mind and have not been systematically evaluated for differential effectiveness. Developing interventions that explicitly address intersecting disadvantages requires moving beyond simple adaptations of single-identity programs toward holistic approaches recognizing the complexity of multiply marginalized students' situations. Rigorous evaluation using experimental or quasi-experimental designs would provide much-needed evidence on what works, for whom, and under what conditions.

Longitudinal research is essential for understanding educational trajectories and transitions, which cannot be fully captured through cross-sectional studies. Tracking students over time would reveal how intersectional disadvantages accumulate, how students' experiences and identities evolve, and how different life stages present distinct challenges. Such research could identify critical periods for intervention and illuminate long-term consequences of educational exclusion.

Research on within-group heterogeneity challenges the tendency to treat SC, ST, and OBC as homogeneous categories, recognizing that significant variation exists within these groups. Understanding this variation is crucial for ensuring that policies benefit not only the relatively advantaged members of marginalized groups but reach those facing multiple, severe disadvantages. Similarly, examining how other identities intersect with caste, class, and gender would advance intersectional analysis beyond three-way interactions to more complex configurations.

Comparative policy analysis leverages natural variation across Indian states to identify effective policy approaches. India's federal structure means that states have substantial autonomy in education policy, creating opportunities for comparison. Systematic analysis could identify policies and practices that successfully address intersectional disadvantages, providing models for replication and scaling.

Implementing these research agendas faces several challenges. Qualitative research requires substantial time and resources, limiting scalability. Intervention research faces ethical challenges in randomization when dealing with disadvantaged populations. Longitudinal studies require long-term funding commitments and face attrition challenges. Within-group heterogeneity research requires large samples to detect subgroup differences. Comparative research requires standardized data collection across states, which is often lacking. Despite these challenges, pursuing these agendas is essential for developing evidence-based approaches to addressing intersectional educational inequality.

X. CONCLUSION

This review has synthesized evidence demonstrating that educational inequality in secondary education cannot be adequately understood through single-axis frameworks examining caste, gender, or class in isolation. The intersection of these identities creates unique configurations of disadvantage wherein SC/ST girls face barriers that are qualitatively different from and quantitatively greater than those experienced by SC/ST boys, upper-caste girls, or students facing single dimensions of marginalization. The evidence consistently supports Crenshaw's intersectionality framework, showing that systems of oppression interact to produce compound discrimination that exceeds the sum of individual effects.

Key findings include persistent gaps in secondary education enrollment, with SC/ST females trailing upper-caste males by 15-20 percentage points despite decades of policy intervention. These disparities reflect multiple mechanisms: institutional discrimination within schools, household resource allocation that prioritizes sons' and upper-caste children's education, internalized limitations on aspirations, and social norms restricting mobility and autonomy. Affirmative action policies, while increasing access to higher education for some SC/ST students, have not adequately addressed institutional cultures and practices that perpetuate discrimination, nor have they reached the most marginalized members of SC/ST communities.

The review identifies critical gaps in current research, including limited qualitative investigation of lived experiences, insufficient attention to heterogeneity within SC/ST categories, minimal evaluation of intersectionality-focused interventions, and lack of longitudinal studies tracking educational trajectories. Proposed research agendas address these gaps through qualitative studies centering SC/ST girls' voices, rigorous intervention research, longitudinal tracking, within-group heterogeneity analysis, and comparative policy studies.

Implications for policy and practice are clear: addressing intersectional educational inequality requires moving beyond single-identity interventions toward comprehensive approaches that recognize complexity. This includes transforming institutional cultures through mandatory training and accountability, eliminating economic barriers through comprehensive financial support, reforming curriculum to challenge stereotypes, increasing representation of SC/ST teachers and administrators, and designing monitoring systems that track intersectional outcomes. Most importantly, policy must be informed by the voices and experiences of multiply marginalized students themselves, ensuring that solutions are grounded in their realities rather than imposed from above.

Achieving educational equity for SC/ST girls represents both a moral imperative and a practical necessity for India's development. Education is widely recognized as key to economic growth, social mobility, and gender equality. Yet, as long as significant portions of the population face systematic exclusion from quality education, India's development potential remains constrained. Intersectional approaches to understanding and addressing educational inequality offer pathways forward, but require sustained commitment, adequate resources, and genuine political will to challenge entrenched systems of privilege and oppression. The evidence reviewed here provides both a sobering assessment of current realities and grounds for hope that, with appropriate interventions, transformative change remains possible.

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