

Educate, Empower, Transform: The Power of Education in Achieving Gender Equality

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Abstract:

Gender equality is not created in schools alone; it begins much earlier, within the family. The family is the first social institution in which children observe relationships, responsibilities, decision-making, and expectations associated with gender. When children grow up seeing equal treatment between boys and girls, they are more likely to develop attitudes that support equality. Conversely, unequal allocation of household responsibilities, educational opportunities, resources, and freedom can reproduce gender inequality from one generation to another. Education therefore has a dual responsibility: it must provide equal opportunities to girls and boys and also challenge the inequalities that children may have learned at home.

In India, the pursuit of gender equality is supported by the Constitution through provisions such as Articles 14, 15, and 21A. Article 21A recognizes free and compulsory education as a Fundamental Right for children between six and fourteen years of age. Education can transform gender relations by developing knowledge, confidence, economic independence, critical thinking, leadership, and awareness of rights. However, meaningful equality requires more than school enrollment. It requires gender-sensitive families, inclusive schools, equitable curricula, supportive teachers, equal access to technology, and opportunities for women to participate in economic and public life. Drawing on books, peer-reviewed research, and the Indian constitutional framework, this article argues that education can transform society only when the journey toward equality begins at home and continues through every stage of life.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Education, Girls' Education, Family, Empowerment, Article 21A, Indian Constitution, Gender Socialization

Introduction

Gender equality does not begin at the school gate; it begins at home. Before a child enters a classroom, the family has already begun teaching the child about the world. Children observe who makes important decisions, who performs household work, whose education is given greater importance, who is encouraged to speak, and who is expected to sacrifice. These everyday experiences can shape ideas about what girls and boys are capable of doing and what roles they should occupy. For this reason, gender equality cannot be understood merely as

equal enrolment of boys and girls in schools. It is a much broader social process. Education becomes meaningful for gender equality when it challenges discriminatory expectations and gives every child the freedom to develop their abilities. The relationship between family and educational opportunity is particularly important in India. Recent research examining educational expenditure among Indian households found gender differences in spending on children's education. Using data from more than 174,000 school- and college-going children, Tiwari and Paltasingh (2022) identified gender gaps in educational expenditure, with the disadvantage becoming more pronounced at higher educational levels. A more recent study by Tiwari and Paltasingh (2025) similarly found substantial gender differences in educational spending in Uttar Pradesh, demonstrating that household decisions can influence the educational opportunities available to boys and girls. This makes the family an essential starting point for discussions about gender equality. The school then becomes the second major environment in which children encounter ideas about gender. Schools can either reinforce stereotypes or challenge them. A classroom where girls are encouraged to participate in science, mathematics, leadership, sports, technology, and public speaking can expand their understanding of what is possible. A classroom that unconsciously associates certain subjects or occupations with one gender can reproduce inequality. Education, therefore, has the power to educate, empower, and transform.

Gender Equality Begins at Home

The family is often called the first school of a child. Parents and other family members are children's earliest teachers, even when no formal teaching takes place. Children learn through observation. If a daughter sees her mother performing most domestic responsibilities while her father makes important decisions, she may unconsciously learn that household work belongs primarily to women and authority belongs primarily to men. Similarly, if a son is taught that emotional expression or caregiving is inappropriate for boys, he may develop a restricted understanding of masculinity. Gender socialization can therefore begin through ordinary daily activities. The issue is not that every family must have identical roles. Rather, the important question is whether opportunities, responsibilities, respect, and freedom are distributed according to ability and choice rather than gender.

Equal education within the family

One of the clearest ways families can promote gender equality is by valuing the education of sons and daughters equally. Families make many educational decisions: which school a child attends, how much is spent on education, whether private tuition is provided, whether a child is encouraged to continue to higher education, and whether education is considered a priority when family resources are limited. Research has shown that these decisions are not always gender-neutral. Bhandari (2021) found evidence of pro-male bias in household educational expenditure in rural West Bengal and concluded that discriminatory parental behaviour explained a substantial portion of the observed spending gap. Such findings demonstrate why

gender equality must begin inside the household (*Artha Vijnana*). If a family says that a daughter does not need higher education because she will eventually marry, while a son is encouraged to pursue university education, inequality is being created before the child reaches the workplace. Therefore, parents have an important role in ensuring that:

- Daughters and sons receive equal encouragement to study;
- Educational expenses are distributed fairly;
- Household responsibilities are shared;
- Both boys and girls are encouraged to dream ambitiously;
- Daughters are allowed to make educational and career choices;
- Sons are taught to respect and support gender equality.

Education cannot completely correct inequalities that families continually reproduce. The family and school must work together.

From the Family to the Classroom

The transition from home to school should not mean leaving gender socialization behind. Children bring their experiences, assumptions, and expectations into classrooms. Schools therefore have an important opportunity to examine and challenge ideas that students may have learned at home. For example, if a girl has been repeatedly told that mathematics or technology is “for boys,” a teacher can provide encouragement and examples that challenge that belief. Similarly, if boys have been taught that leadership is primarily masculine, classroom activities can demonstrate that leadership is based on ability, responsibility, and cooperation rather than gender. Urvashi Sahni's *Reaching for the Sky: Empowering Girls Through Education* provides a particularly important Indian example. Sahni documents the experience of Prerna Girls School in Lucknow, where education was deliberately designed to help disadvantaged girls develop autonomy, confidence, and a sense of agency. The book argues that education can become transformative when it responds to girls' actual lives and challenges rather than simply providing conventional academic instruction (Sahni, 2017). Education should not merely teach girls how to succeed within an unequal society; it should also give them the confidence and knowledge to question inequality.

Education as a Constitutional Right in India

Gender equality in education is not merely a social aspiration in India. It is connected with constitutional principles. The Constitution of India provides a framework for equality and non-discrimination.

Article 14: Equality Before Law

Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws. This establishes equality as a fundamental constitutional principle. In the context of education, it supports the idea that children should not be denied opportunities simply because of their gender.

Article 15: Prohibition of Discrimination

Article 15 prohibits discrimination on specified grounds, including sex. At the same time, Article 15(3) allows the State to make special provisions for women and children. This is significant because achieving genuine equality sometimes requires measures specifically designed to overcome historical disadvantage.

Article 21A: Right to Education

Article 21A is especially important for education. It provides that the State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children between six and fourteen years of age in the manner determined by law. The provision was introduced through the Constitution (Eighty-Sixth Amendment) Act, 2002. Article 21A therefore transforms education from merely a desirable social objective into a Fundamental Right for children in the specified age group.

The constitutional framework demonstrates that education and equality are closely connected. A society cannot realistically achieve gender equality while denying a section of its children's equal educational opportunities.

Education: From Literacy to Empowerment

Education is sometimes understood simply as the process of acquiring information or qualifications. Its significance for gender equality is much greater.

True education develops:

- Critical thinking;
- Communication skills;
- Self-confidence;
- Decision-making ability;
- Awareness of rights;
- Problem-solving ability;
- Social participation; and
- The capacity to imagine alternative futures.

This is why education can be described as a form of empowerment. Sahni (2017) demonstrates this through the experiences of girls at Prerna Girls School. The school did not merely seek to improve academic outcomes; it sought to develop girls' voices, autonomy, and ability to influence their own lives and families. The importance of this approach is also reflected in Sahni's later discussion of the Prerna initiative, which describes girls' education as a pathway extending beyond literacy toward broader life outcomes (Sahni, 2019). Thus, the most powerful question is not merely: "How many girls are attending school?" but: "What is education enabling those girls to become?"

Breaking Gender Stereotypes Through Education

Gender stereotypes restrict both girls and boys. A stereotype may suggest that girls should be caring, quiet, obedient, or interested primarily in traditionally feminine occupations, while boys should be strong, competitive, financially successful, or suited to leadership. These assumptions can influence educational choices. A girl who believes that science is masculine may avoid STEM subjects. A boy who believes that caring professions are feminine may avoid nursing or early-childhood education. Consequently, stereotypes can restrict individual potential and contribute to occupational segregation. Schools can challenge these stereotypes through curriculum, teaching methods, classroom participation, textbooks, and role models.

A gender-sensitive education system should show students that:

- Women can be scientists and engineers;
- Men can be caregivers and teachers;
- Girls can be leaders;
- Boys can express emotions;
- Domestic responsibilities can be shared;
- Intellectual ability is not determined by gender.

Education therefore becomes a space in which children can question assumptions rather than simply inherit them.

Textbooks and the Hidden Curriculum

Education is communicated not only through what teachers explicitly teach but also through what students repeatedly see and experience. Textbooks may influence children's understanding of gender roles. If illustrations consistently show men as doctors, scientists, leaders, and decision-makers while women are shown mainly as homemakers, children may internalize the idea that certain occupations belong naturally to one gender. Similarly, the "hidden curriculum" of schools can communicate messages about gender through classroom behaviour, teacher expectations, sports opportunities, leadership roles, and discipline. This is why

gender equality requires examination of the entire educational environment. A truly gender-equal curriculum should not simply add a few famous women to textbooks. It should encourage students to understand how social structures, opportunities, rights, and responsibilities have developed over time. Education should teach students to think critically about inequality, not merely memorize definitions of equality.

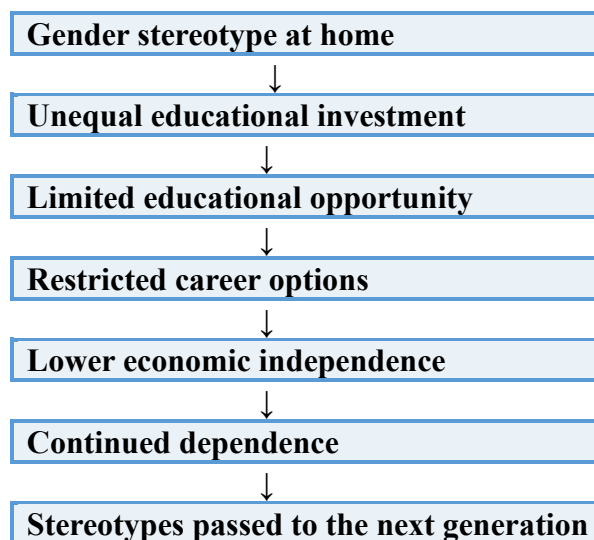
Gender Equality and Economic Empowerment

Education is also closely associated with economic opportunity. When girls receive quality education, they can acquire skills that allow them to pursue employment, entrepreneurship, professional careers, and further education. Economic independence can strengthen women's ability to participate in decisions within their families and communities. However, it is important not to reduce women's education to its economic value. Girls deserve education because education is a right. Economic benefits are an important consequence, not the only justification. At the same time, the economic argument demonstrates why societies cannot afford to exclude girls from education. A society that restricts half of its population from fully developing its abilities is limiting its own human potential. Therefore, investment in girls' education are simultaneously an investment in individual dignity, an investment in families, an investment in communities, and an investment in national development.

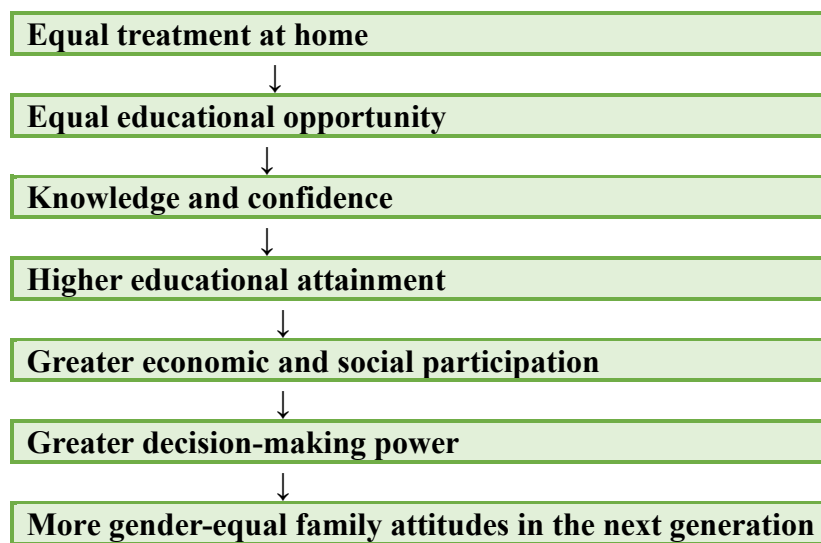
The Family–Education–Economy Connection

The relationship between family and education can create either a cycle of inequality or a cycle of empowerment. It considers two possibilities.

Cycle of Inequality



Cycle of Empowerment



The second cycle illustrates why education can have an intergenerational effect. When an educated woman becomes a parent, she can influence the education, expectations, and opportunities of her children. In this way, one person's education can affect people who have not yet been born.

Education and Women's Leadership

Gender equality cannot be complete if women receive education but remain excluded from decision-making. Leadership requires more than academic qualifications. It requires confidence, communication, critical thinking, negotiation, cooperation, and the ability to make decisions. Schools can begin developing these abilities at an early age.

Girls should be encouraged to:

- Participate in debates;
- Lead group activities;
- Take responsibility in student organizations;
- Participate in sports;
- Speak publicly;
- Participate in scientific activities;
- Use technology;
- Express disagreement respectfully; and
- Take part in community projects.

These experiences can help girls develop a sense of agency. Sahni's work is particularly relevant here because the Prerna model treats empowerment as a social process in which girls develop their voices and use them to

influence their surroundings. Education therefore should not simply prepare girls to fit into existing institutions. It should prepare them to participate in shaping those institutions.

Boys and Men as Partners in Gender Equality

Gender equality cannot be achieved by educating girls alone. Boys also need education about equality. If girls are taught that they can become leaders but boys continue to believe that women should remain subordinate, social transformation will remain incomplete. Boys should therefore learn that:

- Household work is a shared responsibility;
- Women and men deserve equal respect;
- Leadership is not determined by gender;
- Girls have the same intellectual potential;
- Discrimination is harmful;
- Caregiving is not exclusively a woman's responsibility.

Sahni's book explicitly includes an epilogue concerning educating boys for gender justice, reinforcing the idea that transforming gender relations requires engagement beyond girls alone. Gender equality is therefore not a competition between men and women (*Bloomsbury Publishing*). It is a project of building a society in which both girls and boys are free from restrictive gender expectations.

The Indian Family and Educational Inequality

The Indian context makes the family dimension particularly important. Educational progress has expanded opportunities for girls, but research continues to identify differences in educational participation and household expenditure. For example, Tiwari and Paltasingh (2022) examined data covering children aged 6–22 and found gender gaps in educational spending across several age groups. The differences became particularly significant at higher levels of education. Their findings also show why simply saying “girls have access to school” does not tell the whole story. Two children may both be enrolled but may not receive equal educational resources. One child may receive:

- Private tuition
- A personal digital device
- Better educational materials
- Greater freedom to study
- Financial support for higher education

Another may technically attend school but receive fewer resources because of gender-based expectations. Thus, equality of enrolment is not necessarily equality of opportunity. This distinction is essential when discussing gender equality.

Education and Intersectionality

Gender does not operate in isolation. A girl's educational opportunities may also be affected by:

- Poverty
- Caste
- Geographical location
- Disability
- Family income
- Social expectations
- Access to technology
- Language
- Parental education

Therefore, policies aimed at gender equality must consider the different circumstances in which girls live. Sahni's account of Prerna Girls School is particularly valuable because it focuses on girls from disadvantaged backgrounds and demonstrates that educational transformation requires attention to the social realities surrounding students. A universal approach that treats all girls as having identical experiences may overlook those who face multiple disadvantages. Gender equality must therefore mean equal dignity and opportunity while recognizing unequal starting conditions.

Education and Digital Gender Equality

The meaning of education is changing rapidly because technology has become part of learning.

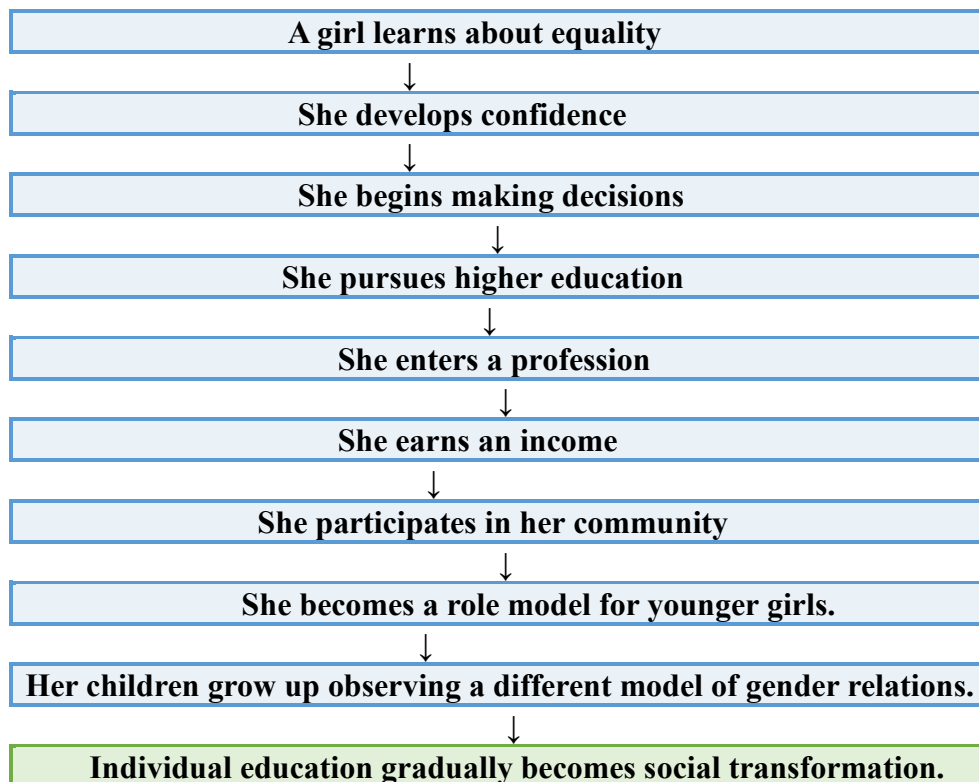
Digital platforms can provide access to:

- Online courses
- Educational videos
- Digital libraries
- Virtual classrooms
- Scientific resources
- Career information
- Communication networks

However, unequal access to technology can reproduce existing gender inequalities. If a family has one smartphone and the son is given priority for educational use, the digital divide becomes another form of gender inequality. Therefore, digital equality requires not merely providing technology but ensuring that girls have equal access, digital skills, safe online environments, and encouragement to use technology for learning. Technology should expand educational freedom, not reproduce existing restrictions.

Individual Education to Social Transformation

This is how individual education can gradually become social transformation.



Sahni's account of Prerna demonstrates precisely this movement from individual empowerment toward changes in girls' families and communities. The school has served thousands of girls and emphasizes developing autonomy and agency rather than limiting education to conventional academic outcomes. The transformation therefore happens at several levels:

Individual → Family → School → Community → Economy → Society

What Needs to Change?

If education is to become a genuine instrument of gender equality, several changes are necessary. First, families must begin with equality. Parents should value daughters' education as much as sons' education and distribute household responsibilities fairly. Second, schools must become gender-sensitive. Teachers should examine unconscious biases and ensure equal participation. Third, curricula must challenge stereotypes. Students

should see women and men represented in diverse professions and social roles. Fourth, girls must be encouraged to enter STEM and leadership. Their choices should be guided by interest and ability rather than gender expectations. Fifth, boys must participate in gender-equality education. Gender justice cannot be achieved if only girls are taught about equality. Sixth, educational policies must address disadvantaged girls. Poverty, location, disability, caste, and lack of technology should not become barriers to education. Seventh, constitutional rights must become lived realities. The existence of Article 21A is significant, but constitutional promises become meaningful only when children actually experience accessible and quality education.

Conclusion

Gender equality begins at home, develops in the classroom, is protected by law, and becomes visible in society. The journey toward equality therefore cannot be reduced to sending more girls to school. Education must transform the beliefs and structures that determine what girls and boys are allowed to become. The family is the first place where children learn about gender. If equality is practiced at home, children begin their educational journey with a stronger understanding of fairness. If schools reinforce that equality, they can challenge stereotypes and develop confidence. If constitutional rights protect access to education, society creates a legal foundation for opportunity. If education then leads to economic participation, leadership, and decision-making, individual empowerment can become social transformation. India's constitutional framework provides a strong foundation for this vision. Articles 14 and 15 establish principles of equality and non-discrimination, while Article 21A recognizes free and compulsory education as a Fundamental Right for children between six and fourteen years of age. Laws alone cannot change attitudes so, families, schools, curricula, and social expectations must also change. And education must change from simply transferring knowledge to developing agency, equality, and freedom. The evidence from Indian research shows that gender inequality can exist even within educational spending and household decisions. At the same time, the experience documented by Sahni demonstrates the transformative possibilities of education when girls are encouraged to become autonomous and confident individuals. The ultimate goal, therefore, is not simply to educate girls. It is to create a society in which girls and boys are equally valued, equally educated, equally respected, and equally free to determine their futures. That is the true meaning of: Educate. Empower. Transform.

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