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PATRIARCHAL NORMS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON THE EDUCATION OF THE GIRL CHILD

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ABSTRACT
Patriarchal norms constitute one of the most pervasive structural forces shaping the educational trajectories of girl children, particularly in India. Rooted in cultural, social, and religious beliefs that valorise male authority and diminish female agency, these norms operate at the family, community, school, and policy levels to restrict girls' access to and completion of formal education. Drawing on empirical evidence and sociological frameworks, this paper critically examines how son preference, early marriage, domestic labour burdens, mobility restrictions, gendered school cultures, and biased curricula collectively function as barriers to girls' schooling. It further explores how intersecting inequalities of caste, class, and religion intensify educational exclusion. The paper concludes by reflecting on the transformative potential of feminist pedagogy, community mobilisation, and inclusive policy frameworks — including NEP 2020 — in dismantling patriarchal barriers and realising every girl child's right to quality education.
KEYWORDS: *Patriarchal Norms, Girl Child Education, Gender Inequality, School Dropout, Feminist Pedagogy, NEP 2020, India*

1. INTRODUCTION
Education is universally recognised as a gateway to individual empowerment and social mobility. Yet formal schooling remains profoundly unequal across gender lines. Despite India's constitutional mandate under Article 21-A and the Right to Education Act, 2009, millions of girl children continue to face formidable obstacles in accessing and completing quality schooling (UNESCO, 2022). These obstacles are systematically produced by patriarchal norms — beliefs, practices, and institutional arrangements that privilege men and assign subordinate roles to girls from birth.

Walby (1990) defines patriarchy as a system of social structures through which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women. In educational contexts, such dominance manifests through gender-biased curricula, androcentric pedagogical practices, and the socialisation of girls into domesticity. These forces create what Bourdieu (1977) calls a "habitus" — internalised dispositions that make gender inequality appear natural and inevitable. In India, the intersection of patriarchy with caste hierarchy, religious orthodoxy, and economic deprivation produces particularly acute forms of educational exclusion for girl children (Ramachandran, 2004). While female literacy has risen from 18.3% in 1951 to 70.3% in 2021 (Census of India, 2021), persistent gender gaps at secondary and higher levels indicate that enrolment gains have not translated into substantive equality.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
This paper draws upon three interconnected theoretical traditions. First, Walby's (1990) feminist sociology identifies the household, the state, and cultural institutions — including schools — as key sites of patriarchal reproduction. Connell's (1987) concept of "gender regimes" further highlights how institutions develop internal patterns of power that shape boys' and girls' experiences differently. Second, Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) social reproduction theory argues that education legitimises and naturalises existing inequalities by privileging masculine cultural capital while devaluing women's knowledge and experience. The "hidden curriculum" — the unspoken norms and expectations transmitted through school routines — operates as a powerful instrument of gender socialisation (Apple, 1979). Third, Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework draws attention to how gender, caste, class, and religion interact to produce compounded forms of disadvantage. A Dalit girl in rural Chhattisgarh faces qualitatively different educational barriers than an upper-caste girl in an urban setting, demanding context-sensitive analyses and responses (Bhog, 2002).

3. FAMILY-LEVEL PATRIARCHAL NORMS
Son preference — the cultural valuation of male over female children, rooted in beliefs about economic utility and lineage continuity — directly affects educational investment decisions (Clark, 2000). Families with limited resources disproportionately allocate them towards sons' schooling, while daughters are directed towards domestic skill acquisition (Kingdon, 2002). NFHS-5 data reveal that girls in the 15–17 age group remain significantly more likely than boys to be out of school, especially in Bihar, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh (IIPS & ICF, 2021).

Child marriage represents another powerful mechanism through which patriarchal norms terminate girls' educational trajectories. Despite the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, NFHS-5 data indicate that 23.3% of women aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18 (IIPS & ICF, 2021). Early marriage places girls in domestic and reproductive roles at

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premature ages, perpetuating intergenerational cycles of gender inequality (Dahl, 2010). Additionally, girls are routinely assigned domestic responsibilities — cooking, cleaning, child-care — that compete with schooling in time and energy (Unterhalter, 2007), leaving less time for the sustained academic engagement necessary for quality learning outcomes (Filmer, 2000).

4. COMMUNITY-LEVEL BARRIERS

Community-level norms impose restrictions on girls' physical mobility that compromise their access to schooling. In many rural and semi-urban communities, unaccompanied movement of adolescent girls is considered culturally inappropriate. Families frequently withdraw girls from school at puberty, citing concerns about sexual safety and family honour (Chaudhry, 2013). Long distances to schools in rural areas amplify these concerns: studies in Rajasthan and Jharkhand demonstrate that girls' secondary enrolment increases substantially when schools are located within one to two kilometres of their homes (Muralidharan & Prakash, 2017). Caste hierarchies further compound patriarchal exclusion: entrenched social attitudes devalue Dalit and Adivasi girls' educational attainment, and discrimination within schools contributes to elevated dropout rates among these communities (Nambissan, 2009).

5. PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURES WITHIN SCHOOLS

School infrastructure itself encodes patriarchal messages. The absence of functional, private girls' toilets — documented across rural schools in Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and North-Eastern states by UDISE+ 2021–22 data — is a significant driver of girls' dropout at adolescence, particularly after the onset of menstruation (Sommer et al., 2015; Ministry of Education, 2022). Teacher attitudes similarly reproduce patriarchal norms: research has documented differential classroom treatment of boys and girls, with boys called upon more frequently for intellectual tasks while girls are assigned domestic or decorative roles (Kumar, 2010). Such micro-inequities accumulate over time to significantly undermine girls' academic confidence and aspirations (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Textbook analyses further reveal gender-stereotyped representations — women as domestic and passive, men as active and authoritative — that normalise patriarchal social order and communicate to girls that knowledge production is a masculine domain (Govinda, 2011).

6. POLICY RESPONSES AND LIMITATIONS

The Indian state has deployed several interventions to address gender inequity: the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) residential schools for marginalised girls, the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao campaign, and Samagra Shiksha's gender-sensitive provisions. NEP 2020 calls for Gender Inclusion Funds, universal foundational literacy, and special provisions for Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, access-focused interventions that build schools and provide incentives address symptoms of patriarchal exclusion without engaging its root causes in family and community norms (Ramachandran, 2004). The implementation gap between policy intent and ground-level reality further limits effectiveness: KGBV schools in several states have been criticised for poor infrastructure and a curriculum that prepares girls for docile womanhood rather than critical citizenship (Misra, 2016).

7. PATHWAYS TO TRANSFORMATION

Feminist pedagogy, as theorised by hooks (1994) and Freire (1970), offers a transformative alternative — centring students' lived experiences, fostering critical consciousness about gender and power, and creating participatory classroom cultures where girls' voices are valued. Community-based programmes such as Mahila Samakhya demonstrated that sustained collective dialogue can shift patriarchal attitudes about girls' education (Govinda, 2011). Teacher education must be reoriented to embed gender-responsive pedagogy, and the Integrated Teacher Education Programme (ITEP) under NEP 2020 offers an important opportunity for this (Pandey, 2021). Legal frameworks — including POCSO 2012 and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act — provide critical enabling conditions, but require robust implementation and community legal literacy to be effective.

8. CONCLUSION

Patriarchal norms exert a pervasive, multi-dimensional influence on the education of girl children, operating through interlocking mechanisms at the family, community, school, and policy levels. Addressing this demands more than technical programmatic responses; it requires a fundamental transformation of social norms, institutional cultures, and power relations. Progress must ultimately be measured not in enrolment statistics alone but in the quality of girls' educational experiences, their learning outcomes, the aspirations they are enabled to cultivate, and the agency they acquire to navigate — and transform — a patriarchal world. The education of the girl child is not a peripheral concern of educational policy; it is its moral and democratic centre.

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