

English Language Education in Rural Contexts: Gendered Inequalities and Structural Barriers

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Abstract

English education in India is widely perceived as a key pathway to social mobility; however, access to and engagement with English language learning remain deeply unequal in rural contexts. The present paper examines gendered inequalities and structural barriers shaping English language education in rural settings, with particular attention to how socio-cultural norms, institutional practices, and economic constraints disproportionately affect female learners. Drawing on feminist educational theory and critical perspectives on language and power, the current study investigates the ways in which gender intersects with class, geography, and access to resources to influence participation and achievement in English classrooms. Using a qualitative research design involving classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with students and teachers, and an analysis of curricular materials, this study reveals persistent disparities in access to quality instruction, classroom participation, and learning opportunities. Findings indicate that patriarchal expectations, limited infrastructural support, gender-biased pedagogical practices, and restricted digital access collectively hinder rural girls' engagement with English language teaching. This paper argues that English language education in rural contexts often reproduces existing gender hierarchies rather than challenging them. By foregrounding rural learners' lived experiences, the current study highlights the urgent need for gender-sensitive pedagogy, inclusive curriculum design, and equitable educational policies to address structural inequities in rural English education.

Keywords: Gender inequality; Rural education; English language education; Structural barriers; Educational equity; socio-cultural norms.

1. Introduction:

For several students in rural India, learning English language is not merely an academic requirement but a deeply personal aspiration connected to their hopes of employment, higher education, and social mobility. English is often perceived as a

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language that opens doors beyond the village, towards confidence, visibility, and participation in wider social worlds. Yet, these aspirations are not experienced equally. While boys are often encouraged to pursue education as an investment in the future, girls frequently encounter restriction, hesitation, or outright resistance shaped by entrenched gender constraints.

In contemporary Indian educational context, English language education occupies a significant position of immense socio-economic and symbolic value. However, in rural contexts, classrooms are shaped by shortages of trained teachers, overcrowded classrooms, and limited exposure to spoken English, and fragile infrastructural support. Within these already constrained spaces, gender becomes a decisive factor influencing who speaks, who remains silent, and whose educational ambitions are prioritised.

Rural girls often navigate multiple and overlapping responsibilities, household labour, caregiving, sibling care, and expectations of early marriage, which directly interfere with regular attendance and sustained engagement with English language learning. These challenges are rarely recognised within formal educational structures, where failure is often attributed to lack of ability rather than lack of opportunity. Consequently, English language education, instead of functioning as a tool of empowerment, frequently mirrors and reinforces existing social hierarchies.

The present paper examines how gendered inequalities are produced and sustained within rural English language education in India. By foregrounding everyday classroom experiences and learners' voices, this study highlights the structural barriers that limit equitable participation and argues for a more gender-sensitive and context-responsive approach to English language education.

2. Literature Review:

Scholars have highlighted the unequal conditions under which rural students, particularly girls, pursue education. Although enrolment rates for girls in India have increased over the years, their participation and retention often remain limited. Social expectations around domestic work, care giving, and adherence to traditional gender roles continue to shape girls' educational experiences, influencing both access to schooling and their engagement in classroom activities (Menon 2012).

English education occupies a distinctive position within this landscape of inequality. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of linguistic and symbolic capital, language proficiency can be understood as a socially valued resource that is unevenly distributed across different social groups. In rural Indian context, English is often associated with urban privilege, middle-class identity, and professional mobility.

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Government schools in rural areas, however, frequently lack trained English language teachers and communicative learning environments, limiting students' exposure to functional language use. As a result, English language often operates as a marker of exclusion rather than empowerment (Bourdieu).

Feminist scholars have further demonstrated how classrooms themselves are gendered spaces. Bell Hooks emphasises that pedagogical practices often silence marginalised voices unless consciously reoriented towards inclusion (hooks). In rural English classrooms, girls are frequently discouraged both explicitly and implicitly, from speaking aloud, making mistakes, or asserting opinions. Textbooks and curricular materials often reinforce traditional gender roles, offering limited representations of women as active agents.

Despite extensive research on gender and education, relatively little scholarship has focused specifically on the intersection of gender, rurality, and English language education. This study addresses this gap by centring everyday classroom experiences and examining how structural gender inequalities are lived, negotiated, and sometimes resisted by rural learners.

3. Theoretical Framework:

The analysis in this paper is guided by feminist educational theory and critical language pedagogy, both of which foreground questions of power dynamics, voice, and social justice. Feminist theory draws attention to how patriarchal constraints shape educational institutions and everyday practices, often rendering women's labour and experiences invisible. Menon argues that gender inequality in India must be understood as structural rather than incidental, embedded in social expectations and institutional arrangements (Menon).

Critical language pedagogy, particularly as articulated by Freire, challenges the notion of education as a neutral process. Freire views education and language education in particular, as a space where domination can either be reproduced or contested (Freire). From this perspective, English classrooms are not merely sites of skill acquisition but arenas where confidence, authority, and legitimacy are negotiated.

Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital further illuminates how access to English proficiency is regulated by social structures (Bourdieu). Students who lack exposure, encouragement, or institutional support are often perceived as less capable, even when structural barriers limit their opportunities. Together, these theoretical perspectives enable a reading of rural English education as a deeply gendered and political practice.

4. Methodology:

The current study adopts a qualitative research design to capture the everyday realities of teaching and learning English in rural Indian classrooms. Qualitative methods were chosen to foreground learners' experiences and to understand how gendered inequalities are enacted in routine interactions rather than only through measurable outcomes.

Research Context and Sample

The fieldwork was conducted in government secondary schools located in a rural context of India. The schools serve first-generation learners from agrarian and daily-wage households. The sample included students from Classes IX–X and English teachers with varied professional training and years of experience.

Data Collection

Data were generated through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with students and English teachers, and an analysis of prescribed English textbooks. Observations focused on participation patterns, teacher feedback, and opportunities for spoken English language. Interviews invited students to reflect on their aspirations, classroom experiences, and constraints encountered at home and school.

Ethical Considerations and Researcher Positionality

Ethical considerations guided all stages of the study. Informed consent was obtained, anonymity ensured, and particular care taken while engaging with female students given local gender norms. The researcher's engagement in rural classrooms shaped the analysis: sustained observation revealed how silence, hesitation, and participation are produced relationally within classrooms. Reflexive notes were maintained to account for positionality and to avoid deficit interpretations of learners' practices.

Data were analysed thematically, attending to recurring patterns related to gender, access, confidence, and institutional support.

During classroom visits, it became evident that gendered patterns of participation were not always the result of overt discrimination but emerged through everyday routines, who was asked to read aloud, who hesitated before answering, and whose mistakes were corrected gently or publicly. On several occasions, female students demonstrated strong comprehension in written work yet avoided speaking in class, later explaining their reluctance as a fear of being laughed at or corrected harshly. Informal conversations with teachers further revealed the pressure they faced to complete syllabi within limited time, often at the cost of inclusive classroom interaction. These field experiences shaped the

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analytical focus of the study, reinforcing the need to understand gender inequality in rural English language education as a lived and relational process rather than a purely statistical phenomenon.

5. Findings and Analysis:

Gendered Access to English Education-The findings reveals that access to English language education for rural girls is shaped as much by home environments as by school structures. Many female students described irregular attendance due to household responsibilities such as cooking, fetching water and caring for younger siblings. Education was often viewed as secondary to domestic duties, particularly during examination periods or agricultural seasons. In contrast, male students were more likely to receive consistent family support for schooling.

Classroom Participation and Silence- Classroom observations highlighted a noticeable gender divide in participation. Boys were more frequently called upon to read aloud, answer questions, and lead activities. Girls, even when academically capable, often remained silent. Several students expressed fear of ridicule for incorrect pronunciation or grammatical errors. Teachers, though rarely overtly discriminatory, tended to interpret girls' silence as lack of ability rather than lack of confidence.

Structural and Infrastructural Constraints- Infrastructural limitations significantly shaped English learning experiences. Overcrowded classrooms, limited teaching aids, and an emphasis on rote learning restricted opportunities for spoken English practice. Digital resources, where available, were unevenly accessed. Girls reported limited access to mobile phones or internet facilities at home, further widening the gap in exposure to English beyond the classroom.

Curriculum and Representation- Textbook analysis revealed a persistent underrepresentation of women in diverse and empowered roles. Lessons often portrayed women within domestic or supportive roles, subtly reinforcing gender norms. Such representations limit the imaginative possibilities available to girl learners and undermine the transformative potential of English education.

6. Discussion:

The findings suggest that gendered inequalities in rural English education are produced through interplay of social expectations, institutional practices, and material constraints. Girls' limited participation cannot be understood as individual reluctance but must be situated within broader structures that discourage visibility and voice. As Hooks argues, silence in classrooms often reflects power relations rather than lack of knowledge (hooks).

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English education, positioned as a pathway to empowerment, paradoxically reproduces social hierarchies when structural barriers remain unaddressed. Without gender-sensitive pedagogy and supportive learning environments, English classrooms risk reinforcing existing inequalities. A critical rethinking of curriculum, teacher training, and classroom practices is therefore essential.

7. Conclusion:

Thus, the present paper has examined how gendered inequalities and structural barriers shape English language education in rural India. By foregrounding classroom experiences and learner perspectives, the study demonstrates that inequity is not merely a matter of access but of participation, confidence, and recognition.

English language education holds significant promise for social mobility, yet this promise remains unevenly realised. For rural girls, meaningful engagement with English requires not only improved infrastructure but also pedagogical practices that recognise and challenge gendered constraints. Addressing these issues demands sustained policy attention, gender-sensitive teacher training, and curricular reform that reflects diverse lived realities.

Future research may explore longitudinal impacts of gender-responsive interventions or adopt mixed-method approaches to further illuminate pathways toward equity in rural English language education.

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