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# Intersectionality in Inclusive Education: Exploring Gender, Caste, Disability, and Mental Health in Policy Frameworks

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## Abstract

Inclusive education aims to provide education to all by providing equal access and equal opportunity, yet the intersection and compounded disadvantages faced by people of multiple marginalized identities such as gender, caste, disability, and mental health limits these access and participation. Traditional education policies tend to adopt a one-dimensional approach to inclusive education, failing to address the compounded disadvantages faced by students at these intersections. This paper critically reviews the global and Indian policy frameworks through the lens of intersectionality, highlighting the progress and the gaps within inclusive education and mental health support in education systems. The review draws upon from international frameworks such as UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Indian policies like NEP 2020 to identify the key policy gaps that contribute to continued exclusion. Findings suggest that while the frameworks recognize the importance of inclusive education for all, they rarely integrate the solutions in an intersectional manner. The paper recommends a more nuanced

policy approach that incorporates the culturally responsive interventions, training of educators, special pedagogies and improvements emphasizing holistic mental health support with targeted interventions for marginalized groups. The review contributes to a broader discourse on inclusive education and mental health that advocates for an intersectional approach that can inform future policy making and implementation strategies.

**Keywords:** Inclusive education, Intersectionality, Mental Health, and Policy frameworks

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# 1. Introduction

Inclusive education aims to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students, and yet disparities persist due to intersecting identities such as gender, caste, disability etc. Traditional approaches often only focus on singular categories overlooking how overlapping identities create compounded disadvantages for individuals. The concept of intersectionality introduced by Crenshaw (1989), highlights how multiple social identities, like gender, caste, disability, and mental health status, interact with each other to create unique experiences of marginalization and privilege. She argued that the experiences of black women facing discrimination were often only viewed by a one-dimensional focus on either race or gender, rather than the compounded impact of both. This notion is applicable to inclusive education too where policies often focus on single- axis inclusion, such as disability, while overlooking other intersecting forms of marginalization (Keller et al., 2023; Benz et al., 2021)

While international frameworks like Salamanca Statement advocate for inclusive education, its implementation has been critiqued for reinforcing labels and also maintaining deficit perspectives which has led to lack of overall inclusion (D'Alessio, Grima-Farrell, & Cologon, 2018). In India, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes inclusive education but dominantly adopts a disability-centric approach which fails to account for intersecting identities such as caste, gender, and socio-economic status (Thompson, Rohwerder, & Mukherjee, 2022). Similarly, in Europe, inconsistent applications of intersectionality in educational policies have continued marginalization due to fragmented inclusion (Bollig & Jobst, 2022; Benz et al., 2021).

This review paper critically examines intersectionality in the inclusive education policies. It compares the policy frameworks from India and global perspectives, highlighting gaps and best practices. By bridging global and Indian perspectives, the paper contributes to the discourse on equity and social justice in educational policy-making, advocating for transformative equity through intersectional frameworks.

## 2. Literature Analysis

### 2.1 Intersectionality in Inclusive Education

Inclusive education aims to provide equitable access to learning and education for all students. However, according to Engelbrecht et al. (2001), its meaning can vary depending on the cultural and social contexts. UNESCO (2005) defines inclusive education as a "dynamic approach of responding positively to pupil diversity and of seeing individual differences not as problems, but as opportunities for enriching learning." Despite this broad definition, much of the work on inclusive education, particularly in India, has focused on students with disabilities, often neglecting the unique barriers faced by Dalit, queer, and gender-nonconforming students with disabilities (Feyerer, 2012).

A significant step towards inclusive education in India was the Right to Education Act 2009. However, research suggests that India's policies primarily have a disability-centric view of inclusivity, often overlooking the intersections of caste and gender (Narayan & John, 2017). At global levels similar challenges exist, where disadvantaged students from racial or socio-economically marginalized backgrounds are disproportionately diagnosed with special educational needs (Ready & Wright, 2011; Rutigliano, 2020). Misdiagnosis or over diagnosis of marginalized students can further endure inequalities, impacting their educational and social mobility (García & Ortiz, 2013; Kozleski et al., 2014).

The intersectional approaches of inclusive education emphasize that educational inequalities persist due to multiple interconnected systems of power and oppression (Keller et al., 2023). The Salamanca Statement and the subsequent development of India's Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act (1995) and Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act (2016) reinforced the need for inclusive education. While the RPWD Act did introduce a broader definition of disabilities and emphasized non-discrimination, research shows that policies in India still struggle to implement an intersectional approach to inclusion (Math et al., 2019). Scholars such as Bakhshi et al. (2017) and Grills et al. (2019) confirm that children with disability particularly with intersecting gender or socio-economic disadvantage continue to experience lower school enrollment and higher dropout rates.

## **2.2. Intersection of Caste, Gender and Disability**

In the Indian context, the intersection of disability, gender, and caste creates a unique and compounded form of discrimination. The multi-dimensional oppression experienced by Scheduled Caste (SC) women and persons with disabilities (PWDs) in India highlights how overlapping identities create a compounded form of discrimination as highlighted by Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality. While mainstream feminist and disability rights movements have largely focused on single-axis discrimination, the lived realities of SC women with disabilities remain inadequately addressed and covered (Thompson, Rohwerder, & Mukherjee, 2022).

Caste is a deeply entrenched social hierarchy in India which intersects with gender and disability to intensify marginalization. Studies by Pal(2010) , Mehrotra (2013) and others suggest that systemic barriers in access to education, employment, and healthcare is experienced by Dalits, who comprise 16.6% of the Indian population and are often subjected to social stigma and discriminatory practices (Raghavendra, 2020). The prevalence of disability among Dalits is higher than in the general population, with structural inequalities worsening their socio-economic disadvantages (Pal, 2011).

Research indicates that cultural biases contribute to the misdiagnosis and underrepresentation of SC students in special education programs further marginalizing them (Rutigliano, 2020). Additionally, the ingrained patriarchal norms deny Dalit women with disabilities fundamental rights like access to education and economic participation (Kumar, 2021; Haq et al., 2020). Existing research suggests that SC and Scheduled Tribe (ST) women with disabilities receive little to no vocational training which significantly limits their employment prospects (Mehrotra, 2013; Singh, 2017).

Empirical studies reveal that only 2.6% of SC individuals with disabilities get secondary education compared to 3.8% of upper-caste individuals with disabilities (Pal, 2011). Despite the constitutional promises and policy frameworks such as the Right to Education Act (2009) and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) access to inclusive education and employment opportunities remains dis-proportionately low for SC women with disabilities (Math et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2022). Limited educational opportunities further leads to socio-economic disparities continuing the cycle of poverty and dependence (Raghavendra, 2020).

## **2.3. Mental Health and Inclusive Education and Intersectionality**

Mental health plays a crucial role in the success of inclusive education, particularly when we view it through an intersectional lens. Students from marginalized backgrounds whether due to disability, gender, caste, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation face unique mental health challenges that impact their educational access and experience. Armstrong et al. (2019), DeVries et al. (2018), and Hehir et al. (2016) highlights that inclusive environments foster a sense of belonging, reducing stigma and social isolation among students with disabilities and students without disabilities by promoting empathy, social cohesion, and reduced prejudice.

A meta-analysis by Szumski et al. (2017) found out that inclusive education helps with academic achievement for students with learning difficulties and also improves their social interactions. However, the success of inclusion is dependent on adequate implementation, including teacher training, access to resources, and tailored support (Carter et al., 2020). Without these elements students with disabilities may face increased stress and anxiety and educators may experience burnout (Lindsay et al., 2018; Tufue, 2023). Higher levels of stress due to increased workload and insufficient support systems are reported by teachers working in inclusive settings highlighting the necessity for professional development and mental health resources for educators (Honkasilta & Koutsoklenis, 2023; Jennings & Greenberg, 2023).

Intersectional experiences often complicate the mental health outcomes in inclusive education. Research indicates that intersecting marginalized identities limits access to mental health resources and educational opportunities for individuals like Dalit women with disability (Thompson et al. 2022). Structural layers of inequalities rooted in caste, gender, and socioeconomic status leads to increased vulnerability to exclusion, harassment, and reduced access to educational interventions (Pal, 2011; Mehrotra, 2013). Additionally, LGBTQ+ students often report feeling unsafe in school environments, impacting their mental health (Kahle, 2020; Rose et al., 2018). The lack of appropriate mental health interventions with an intersectional lens for individuals with marginalized intersecting identities further impacts the outcomes.

## **2.4. Policy Analyses and Critiques**

Inclusive education policies globally aim to provide equitable learning opportunities but their effectiveness depends on how intersectionality is integrated in the frameworks. This section examines how educational policies in India and various global countries approach intersectionality in education, with a focus on the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in India and the Salamanca Statement.

### **2.4.1 Intersectionality in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020**

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to provide equitable and inclusive education in India focusing on mental health, gender equality, and accessibility to children with disabilities (MHRD, 2020). It emphasizes on integrating mental health education in the curriculum, addressing gender disparities, and ensuring infrastructural accessibility. When viewed through the intersectional lens a major limitation of NEP 2020 is how it adopts a binary approach to gender inclusion, mainly addressing girls and women and inadequately recognizing non-binary and gender non-conforming identities (Mathur & Sharma, 2020). The policy also overlooks the compounded disadvantages as it does not fully address the

intersections of caste, disability, and gender (Pal, 2011; Haq et al., 2020). Additionally, the focus on disability-centric inclusion limits its success and lacks addressing the systemic exclusion faced by students with intersecting identities (Jha et al., 2020). Effective implementation is hindered by resource constraints, inadequate teacher training, and the lack of culturally responsive pedagogy which highlights the need for addressing the complex role of the intersecting identities of individuals (Bhardwaj et al., 2024).

## **2.4.2 The Salamanca Statement: Drawbacks and Critiques**

The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) advocates for inclusive education, highlighting the right of all children to learn together, irrespective of their physical, social, emotional, or linguistic conditions. However, it also contributed to ambiguities between Special Needs Education and inclusive education (Armstrong, 2003). The Statement reinforced the labeling of students who differ from the norm by segregating the settings for students with disabilities 'as far as possible' (UNESCO, 1994) potentially perpetuating exclusion (D'Alessio, Grima-Farrell, & Cologon, 2018). Research suggests that the Salamanca Statement's approach for inclusive education was diluted due to a focus on special needs education, making it a tool of containment rather than systemic change.

An intersectional lens critique of the Salamanca Statement reveals its limitations in addressing compounded disadvantages. Studies show that migrant children are overrepresented in Special Education across Italy and the U.S., highlighting how race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status intersect to reinforce educational exclusion within schools and classrooms (Connor et al., 2016; Artilles et al., 2011).

## **2.5. Global and Indian Perspectives on Inclusive Education**

Globally, inclusive education policies reveal significant differences in how intersectionality is integrated. In Germany, Spain and Luxembourg, certain migrant groups underperform due to intersecting experiences of ethnic background and social status (Benz et al., 2021). In Switzerland, intersectionality is explicitly integrated into policy frameworks, addressing multiple layers of inequalities including migration background, socio-economic status, disabilities, and gender and it can be used as an example to understand how to improve policies (Erzinger et al., 2022). Whereas, in Finland and Ireland intersectionality is largely absent in policy frameworks, with disadvantages being discussed through single categories (Bollig & Jobst, 2022).

In India, the NEP 2020 attempts to address inclusive education but lacks an intersectional framework. It focuses on disability and binary gender perspectives and fails to account for the compounded disadvantages experienced by marginalized groups who are at the intersections of caste, gender, disability, and socio-economic status (Thompson et al., 2022). In contrast to Switzerland's intersectional approach, Indian policies continue to address inclusion through singular lenses, limiting its effectiveness in addressing educational inequalities (Mathur & Sharma, 2020).

A comparative analysis of the global and Indian policies revealed that while intersectionality is being recognized in international policy frameworks its implementation is yet to happen. To achieve inclusivity in education genuinely the educational policies must integrate intersectional frameworks that address the layered needs of marginalized groups. This approach would require culturally responsive mental health interventions, anti-discrimination training for teachers, and targeted interventions for vulnerable communities. Inclusive education policies risk perpetuating existing inequalities, undermining their vision of equitable learning environments without addressing these structural and intersectional gaps.

### **3. Discussion**

This review paper critically examined inclusive education through the lens of intersectionality, focusing on gender, caste, disability, and mental health within the policy frameworks. By analyzing the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in India, the Salamanca Statement and global perspectives from Europe, the paper illustrates how policy frameworks influence the educational access and mental health outcomes for marginalized groups.

The NEP 2020 emphasizes inclusive education and mental health integration but majorly adopts a disability-centric approach missing out on the compounded disadvantages experienced by students at the intersections of caste, gender, disability, and socio-economic status (Thompson, Rohwerder, & Mukherjee, 2022). The binary gender inclusion further impacts the inclusion, particularly for LGBTQ+ students (Mathur & Sharma, 2020). The Salamanca Statement, although advocating for inclusive education, reinforces labeling by having a deficit perception (D'Alessio et al., 2018). The educational inequalities among migrants, ethnic minorities, and socio-economically disadvantaged groups of Europe further illustrate the significance of intersectionality. However, inconsistent application of intersectional frameworks limits policy effectiveness, with Switzerland being a positive example of explicit intersectionality integration (Erzinger et al., 2022).

The findings reveal that current policy frameworks do not properly address the compounded disadvantages faced by marginalized groups. NEP 2020's focus on disability-centric inclusion reflects a lack of in-depth understanding of educational inequalities contributing to exclusion particularly for Dalit girls with disabilities who face multilayered discrimination which impacts their mental health and educational access (Thompson et al., 2022). Similarly, the Salamanca Statement's failure to change the established education systems reinforces micro-exclusion, especially for marginalized students like migrants and ethnic minorities (Connor et al., 2016; Artilles et al., 2011). In Europe, inconsistent application of intersectionality is influenced by its socio-political contexts with countries like Switzerland leading in explicit integration, while others remain limited to categorical approaches (Bollig & Jobst, 2022).

Applying Crenshaw's intersectionality theory (1989) illustrates that educational inequalities are compounded by overlapping social identities. This review challenges the one-size-fits-all approach in inclusive education policies.

## **4. Recommendations and Suggestions**

### **4.1. Policy Framework Enhancement**

To implement inclusive education policies must explicitly integrate intersectionality moving beyond the categorical approaches of addressing the issue. This would require recognizing and addressing overlapping identities that create a compounded disadvantage specially for the people of marginalized groups at the intersections of gender, caste, disability, and mental health. For Example- The dalit girls with disabilities.

### **4.2. Curriculum and Pedagogy Reform**

The curriculum should include diverse cultural, social, and gender identities, and must incorporate narratives that challenge stereotypes and cultural biases around marginalized groups such as Dalits, ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities fostering an environment that values all experiences. Implementing intersectional pedagogy can enhance critical thinking and empathy among students promoting a culture of mutual respect and understanding (Grant & Zwier, 2011).

### **4.3. Teacher Training and Professional Development**

Teacher training programs which equip educators with intersectionality awareness, anti-bias education, and culturally responsive teaching skills can contribute in better implementation of inclusive education. Teachers must be prepared to identify and address the unique challenges faced by students with intersecting identities, including mental health disparities. (Jogdand & Narke, 2022).

### **4.4. Mental Health Support and Social Inclusion**

Culturally sensitive and trauma informed mental health services are necessary to address the complex needs of students at the intersections of disability, caste, and gender. Schools must create safe spaces that promote social inclusion that allows marginalized students to express themselves without fear of stigma. (Singh, 2017; Kumar, 2021).

### **4.5. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Accountability**

Robust monitoring and evaluation systems are important for assessing the impact of inclusive education policies on intersecting identities. Data breakdown and processing by gender, caste, disability, and socio-economic status is essential for identifying gaps and tracking progress. (Vaid, 2012; Pal, 2011). Policymakers should implement accountability mechanisms that ensure policies are responsive to the needs of all marginalized groups.

By adopting these recommendations, educational policy frameworks can move beyond categorical inclusion to achieve genuine equity. An intersectional approach not only enhances educational access and mental health outcomes but also fosters an inclusive society where all students can thrive.

## **5. Conclusions**

This review paper examined the inclusive education policies through the lens of intersectionality focusing on gender, caste, disability and mental health. The paper analysed NEP 2020, the Salamanca Statement and other global policies which revealed significant gaps in addressing compounded disadvantages of marginalized groups impacting their educational access and opportunities. The current frameworks used the categorical or singular axis approach to inclusive education leading to a systemic and layered exclusion. The intersectional approach is essential to understand various inequalities experienced by individuals with overlapping marginalized identities. To attain genuine equity, policies must go beyond singular inclusion and adopt frameworks that prioritize cultural responsiveness, anti-discrimination training, and mental health support from an intersectional lens. This paper highlights the need for equity through intersectional frameworks. By addressing overlapping social identities, educational policies can create equitable learning environments that empower all students. Achieving this requires systemic change and collaborative efforts among policymakers, educators, and communities.

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