



Dreams That Fade, Hope That Remains: Always Remember That Your Superpower Lies In Being A Girl

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Abstract

Girls in India confront a complex web of interrelated challenges that undermine their health, education, safety and life chances. This paper synthesizes national surveys, government reports, NGO analyses and peer reviewed studies to examine seventeen core issues affecting girls, including skewed sex ratios, period poverty, anaemia, limited healthcare access, mental health crises, sexual violence, dowry and domestic abuse, child marriage, school dropout, employment and political underrepresentation, superstition driven stigma, cyber harassment and the pressures of non-traditional family choices. Despite these adversities, Indian girls demonstrate remarkable resilience, emotional intelligence and leadership potential. Drawing on evidence from NFHS, NCRB, UNICEF, MOSPI, NITI Aayog and leading research articles, this study highlights both structural failures and promising programmatic responses. The review concludes with targeted policy priorities to strengthen health services, expand educational retention, improve legal redress and community norms, and invest in girls' economic and civic empowerment.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Child Marriage, Anaemia, Mental Health Challenges, India, Women's Empowerment, Adolescent Girls, Superstitions, Resilience, Education, Social Stigma

Introduction

Across India, girls grow up at the intersection of longstanding social norms and rapidly changing economic and digital landscapes. Persistent son preference, inadequate health and sanitation infrastructure, unequal household expectations, and unsafe environments in school and community settings combine to constrain girls' development. These conditions contribute to high levels of anaemia, menstrual exclusion, mental health disorders including panic attacks and suicidal ideation, and exposure to sexual violence and dowry related harms. At the same time, new risks such as cyber harassment add a layer of vulnerability that can reach girls even in seemingly safe spaces.

Yet the story is not only of loss. Girls across diverse regions show determination and resilience. Educational interventions, community mobilization and targeted health programs have enabled many girls to remain in school, lead local initiatives, and pursue careers in science, sport and civic life. To design effective solutions we need a clear, evidence-based understanding of the multi-layered problems girls face

and the points where policy and community action can change life trajectories. This paper reviews published data and program evaluations to map those problems, identify gaps in current responses and highlight pathways that amplify girls' strengths toward sustained empowerment.

Literature Review

Studies in India show that girls face many linked problems in health, safety and education. NFHS-5 reports highlight that period poverty, poor menstrual hygiene, and high rates of anaemia stop girls from attending school regularly and affect their confidence (NFHS-5, 2019–2021; PIB, 2022; UNICEF, 2023). NCRB data shows that most sexual violence cases are committed by people known to the victims, yet conviction rates stay low, which causes long-term trauma (NCRB, 2022; Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2024). Research also shows that dowry harassment and domestic violence continue to trap many girls in unsafe marriages (Oxfam India, 2020; Sundaramurthy, 2025). UDISE+ and UNICEF studies connect high school dropout rates with early marriage, lack of toilets, unsafe travel and family pressures, especially in rural areas (Ministry of Education, 2022; UNICEF India, 2022).

At the same time, many studies point to emotional struggles like anxiety, panic attacks, and even suicidal thoughts among girls, often made worse by academic stress, social media and lack of counselling in schools (Sinha, 2024; Srivastava et al., 2024; NCERT, 2024). Girls are also less likely to get equal chances in jobs and political roles, limiting their independence and voice (MOSPI, 2024; Statista, 2023). Yet, there are positive examples: programs like Anaemia Mukht Bharat, Educate Girls, and UNESCO's Girls in AI show that with the right support, girls stay in school, take leadership roles and achieve remarkable success (UNESCO, 2023; Girls Not Brides, 2018; NITI Aayog, 2023).

Methodology

This research is based on analysing existing national datasets and peer-reviewed publications, synthesizing findings from NFHS, NCRB, UNICEF, MOSPI and others. Mental, physical, and social health aspects were reviewed alongside education, employment and legal frameworks. Data spans various regions, urban-rural divides and social groups to capture a broad perspective of the challenges girls face in India.

Findings and Discussion

1. Female Foeticide and Skewed Sex Ratio:

One of the gravest challenges Indian girls face is the cultural preference for sons, which has led to female foeticide, the practice of aborting female fetuses (NFHS-5, 2019-21). This has skewed the natural sex ratio at birth to 929 girls for every 1,000 boys, deviating from the expected ratio of nearly 950:1000 (PIB, 2021). This imbalance creates social problems such as increased violence, trafficking, and forced marriages later in life because a shortage of women distorts social dynamics (Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, 2024).

Despite laws banning prenatal sex determination, illegal practices continue, especially in parts of North India. Campaigns like "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao" aim to change societal attitudes to value girls equally and encourage families to protect and educate their daughters (Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, 2024). Progress thrives when laws and communities work together, guaranteeing that every girl has an equal chance at life before birth and beyond.

2. Period Poverty, Menstrual Health and Anaemia:

Health challenges like period poverty, poor menstrual health, and anaemia significantly impact girls in India, affecting their physical well-being, education and confidence. These issues are interconnected, often worsening each other and creating barriers to girls' growth and dreams, but targeted programs are helping to address them.

Many girls struggle with menstruation due to a lack of affordable sanitary pads, with about a quarter using unsafe alternatives like old clothes, leading to infections and missed school days (NFHS-5, 2019–2021). The absence of clean water and private toilets in many schools makes it hard for girls to manage periods with dignity, increasing absenteeism (UNICEF, 2023). Stigma around menstruation, fuelled by myths and silence, prevents open discussions with family or boys, adding to girls' shame and fear (Ministry of Education, 2023; UNFPA, 2022). Anaemia, affecting about 57% of women aged 15 to 49 and many adolescent girls, further complicates these challenges (NFHS-5, 2019–2021). Caused by low iron levels, poor nutrition, parasitic infections, or heavy menstrual bleeding, anaemia leads to fatigue, dizziness and difficulty concentrating, making it tough for girls to attend school regularly or perform well (Sinha et al., 2023; PIB, 2022). Left untreated, it also raises risks during pregnancy, affecting both mothers and babies.

These health issues are linked, poor menstrual hygiene can worsen infections that contribute to anaemia, while anaemia's fatigue increases school absences, limiting access to health education (UNFPA, 2022). Poverty and gender biases in families often prioritize boys' nutrition and care, leaving girls with inadequate diets and untreated health issues (Sinha et al., 2023). Socio-cultural norms that keep periods taboo or assign girls domestic roles further restrict their ability to stay healthy and educated.

Efforts to address these challenges are showing progress. Programs providing free sanitary pads and safe disposal options help girls manage periods and stay in school (NFHS-5, 2019–2021). Educating all children about menstruation breaks taboos, fostering respect and support (Ministry of Education, 2023). The Anaemia Mukht Bharat program offers weekly iron and folic acid supplements, nutrition education, and food fortification to combat anaemia (PIB, 2022). Regular health check-ups in schools, mobile health clinics, and community education about iron-rich foods like green leafy vegetables and pulses can catch and treat health issues early (UNICEF, 2023). Encouraging families to prioritize girls' nutrition, hygiene, and emotional support ensures menstruation and anaemia do not hinder their dreams.

By scaling up free sanitary products, school health programs and community awareness, India can support girls' health and education. These steps create a foundation for a stronger, more empowered generation of girls who can pursue their goals with confidence.

3. Limited Access to Quality Healthcare for Girls:

Many girls in India face barriers in accessing quality healthcare, which affects their physical growth, development and overall well-being (National Health Mission, 2023). Rural areas especially lack adequate health facilities, trained doctors and essential medicines. Girls often receive less medical attention than boys due to persistent gender biases in families, where boys' health is prioritized. This leads to untreated illnesses, malnutrition and delayed immunizations among girls.

Poor healthcare access also impacts adolescent girls' reproductive health. Lack of knowledge about puberty, safe hygiene practices, and menstrual health increases risks of infections and school absenteeism (UNICEF, 2023). Early detection and treatment of conditions like anaemia, infections and malnourishment are rare in many places, leaving girls vulnerable.

Improving girls' health requires strengthening maternal and child health services, mobile health clinics to reach remote areas, and educating families on the importance of equal care for girls and boys. Community health workers can play a vital role in counselling parents and providing adolescent-friendly services. When girls receive timely and quality healthcare, it lays the foundation for a healthier, more empowered generation.

4. Mental Health and Panic Attacks:

Good mental health is very important for young girls to feel happy, safe and ready to learn. But many girls in India face anxiety, panic attacks and depression without enough help (Sinha, 2024). Panic attacks happen when a girl feels suddenly very scared or worried, her heart beats fast and she feels like she can't breathe properly. Sometimes, people around them think they are just "being dramatic," but it is a real health problem that needs care (NCERT, 2024). When girls cannot talk about these feelings, they suffer silently, which can make the problem worse (Sinha, 2024).

In many families, especially where boys are given more importance, girls are expected to be strong and silent when sad or scared (WHO, 2023). This social pressure can make girls feel lonely and stop them from asking for help. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many adolescent girls in rural areas felt very stressed because of closed schools and extra household work (NIMHANS, 2022). On top of this, school pressure and social media create fears about performance and appearance, which many girls find hard to deal with.

Schools that have counsellors who listen patiently and give girls a safe space to talk show much better mental health results (CBSE, 2023). Mental health awareness programs for families and communities can help remove fear and shame related to these problems. When family members support girls' feelings, girls are more likely to ask for help and recover stronger (UNICEF, 2023).

5. Suicidal Ideation:

Some girls feel so sad and pressured that they think about ending their lives (NCRB, 2022). This feeling often grows slowly, especially when families fight, or when girls feel forced to marry early or face violence (UNICEF, 2023). Girls may hide how they feel, not telling even their closest friends or teachers, which makes it hard for others to help. Signs like being alone, not eating or sleeping well, or giving away favourite things are important warnings (Srivastava et al., 2024).

The best protection against suicidal thoughts is emotional support inside the family. When girls feel listened to, loved, and respected by parents and siblings, they feel safer and stronger (UNICEF, 2023). Schools with mental health counsellors who offer private and caring help also reduce these scary feelings (NCERT, 2024). Awareness campaigns in society teaching people about mental health help families understand when to seek help and how to support girls better (UN Women, 2023). If a girl ever says that she wants to hurt herself, it is very important to take it seriously right away. Getting her to a safe place and professional care can be life-saving (Government Health Guidelines, 2024). Building networks of trusted people in schools, homes and communities creates a safety net so no girl feels completely alone (UNICEF, 2023).

6. Sexual Abuse and Harassment:

Sexual abuse and harassment remain a deeply troubling problem for many girls, especially since most perpetrators are known to the victims, including family members or trusted acquaintances (NCRB, 2022). This closeness makes reporting and escaping abuse even harder for girls, as they fear social stigma, family rejection, or disbelief. Fear of shame and a lack of supportive channels often prevent survivors from speaking out. Between these factors, many cases remain hidden and unresolved.

The long legal process in sexual abuse cases further aggravates trauma. Survivors often endure repeated questioning and delays before justice, which deters others from reporting abuse (Reuters, 2024). To combat this, the government has strengthened the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act and established One-Stop Centers to provide integrated support including medical, legal and psychological help (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2024). Yet, implementation gaps and social awareness remain significant challenges.

Prevention and education are key. Early age-appropriate education about body safety and consent helps empower girls to recognize inappropriate behaviour (UNICEF, 2023). Community mobilization programs encouraging adults to protect girls and create safe environments also play a vital role. Trauma-informed counselling services aid survivors' healing and support reintegration into normal life. Continued efforts to sensitize police, judiciary, and healthcare workers are necessary to create a more compassionate and effective system.

7. Dowry, Violence and Neglect:

Marriage often brings tough challenges for girls in India, including domestic abuse, dowry violence, emotional harm, financial struggles and ignored complaints. These issues hurt girls' physical, emotional and social well-being, trapping them in cycles of suffering. Stronger laws, community support, and economic empowerment can help girls escape abuse and rebuild their lives with dignity.

Dowry violence remains a deadly problem, rooted in cultural traditions where families demand money or gifts for marriage. In 2022, over 6,500 girls and women died due to dowry harassment, facing physical or emotional abuse when demands were unmet (National Crime Records Bureau, 2022). Beyond dowry, about 32% of married women face physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, especially in rural and low-income homes (NFHS-5, 2019–2021). Emotional abuse, like being controlled or cut off from family and friends, makes girls feel alone and powerless (Oxfam India, 2020). Financial dependence, with many girls lacking jobs or money, keeps them stuck in harmful marriages (MOSPI, 2024). Young brides also face pressure to have children quickly, raising health risks, especially if they have conditions like anaemia (Sinha et al., 2023).

When girls try to speak out, their complaints are often ignored. Fear of shaming their family or community stops many from reporting, with only 3.5% seeking police help due to distrust in authorities (NCRB, 2022). Many parents feel bringing their daughter back from her marital home disrespects their family's honour, yet they may let her suffer or even die there, raising the question: where does their respect go when her life is at stake? (UN Women, 2023; Oxfam India, 2020). Women's helplines and police stations frequently fail to act, dismissing complaints or urging girls to stay silent to preserve family harmony (NCW, 2024). Less than 1% of some abuse cases are reported, hiding the true scale of suffering (Oxfam India, 2020). This silence makes it harder for girls to get justice or support.

Ending these challenges needs a strong response. Enforcing laws like the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act and anti-dowry laws can punish abusers and deter violence (PRS Legislative Research, 2024; Sundaramurthy, 2025). Social campaigns promoting dowry-free weddings and respect for girls' rights help change harmful norms (Oxfam India, 2020). Jobs and education can give girls financial freedom to escape abuse (International Labour Organization, 2024). Safe spaces, like women's shelters and counselling, offer support and hope (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2024). Community programs teaching families to listen to girls' voices can break the cycle of silence (UN Women, 2023). By taking complaints seriously and supporting girls, India can help them live with strength and dignity.

8. Early and Forced Marriages:

Child marriage is a violation of human rights that endangers the futures of millions of girls in India. According to UNICEF (2023), nearly one-third of child brides worldwide live in India, severely limiting girls' educational opportunities and exposing them to health risks (UNICEF, 2023). Early marriage truncates childhood and forces girls into adult roles without preparation, often leading to early pregnancies with dangerous outcomes.

Family poverty, lack of education, and socio-cultural norms reinforce the practice of child marriage (PRS Legislative Research, 2024). Many families marry daughters early to reduce financial burden or comply

with traditional expectations. Girls married as children face higher risks of domestic violence, school dropout and limited economic independence.

Laws banning child marriage exist, but enforcement is weak in many areas. Combining legal action with community mobilization is essential to protect girls (UNICEF, 2023). Incentivizing school attendance, providing safe environments and empowering girls through education can delay marriage age. Social support groups and local monitoring help identify and prevent forced early marriages.

9. Family Expectations, Social Pressures and Marriage Choices:

In many Indian families, girls face strong pressure to marry within their caste, religion, or community to protect family honour (Pew Research, 2021). Often, marriages are arranged without asking the girl what she truly wants, making her voice and dreams secondary. This pressure not only limits her freedom but also causes stress and sadness when her choices are ignored.

More girls today want to marry for love, based on connection and respect. But even love marriages, especially across caste or religion, often face resistance from families and society. In some cases, girls also face struggles after marriage when husbands or in-laws try to force them to convert, follow a strict ideology, or accept restrictions that take away their freedom. Such control destroys the real meaning of love. True love has no religion, it is built on trust, equality, and understanding, where both partners respect each other and treat humanity as the highest value.

Studies show that marriages based on love and consent are usually healthier and happier than forced or pressured ones, because they are built on friendship, respect and choice (UN Women, 2023). Families and communities must support girls in making their own decisions. It is also important to choose a partner wisely, not someone who only pretends before marriage and later changes, but someone who is honest and consistent. If sensitive issues like religion, lifestyle, or ideology could cause conflict later, couples should discuss them openly before marriage, and even make mutual agreements if needed, to ensure clarity and respect. A true partner will never force, judge, or control, they will grow with you in honesty, trust and humanity. When marriages are chosen freely and based on respect, both partners thrive together, and society moves closer to openness and equality.

10. Unequal Expectations and Restricted Opportunities at Home:

In many families, girls are often quietly but firmly told that their main role is to handle household chores because this is what “prepares them for the future” (IWWAGE, 2024). While boys may be encouraged to help with family businesses, studies, or other activities outside the home, girls frequently face restrictions on where they can go or what they can do, reinforcing the idea that their place is mainly inside the house.

These subtle but powerful messages limit a girl’s chances to explore talents, gain new experiences, or build confidence beyond the home walls (IIMA, 2023). The family’s focus on traditional roles makes it difficult for girls to dream of other possibilities or participate equally in family or economic life. Such dynamics generate feelings of exclusion and can dampen a girl’s sense of self-worth and hope for the future.

Creating change starts with families recognizing girls’ right to equal opportunities, whether in education, business, or social spaces. When girls receive support to join family activities or pursue interests beyond household duties, they develop skills and confidence that benefit not only themselves but their communities.

11. Emotional Struggles within Families and Feeling Unheard:

Some girls face difficult situations at home where their feelings and voices are not fully heard or respected. Sometimes, family members may unintentionally dismiss their worries or express frustration in ways that make girls feel misunderstood or blamed for things beyond their control. This can happen in families going through challenges or changes, where adults may have their own stresses and find it hard to provide the care and attention girls need.

When girls are not given a safe space to express themselves, they may feel lonely, hurt, or unsure of where to turn for support. Toxic words or repeated misunderstandings from close relatives can deepen feelings of isolation. It is important for families and communities to recognize these emotional struggles and respond with patience, kindness, and listening, so every girl feels valued and supported, no matter what pressures are around her.

12. Systemic Challenges in Receiving Emotional Support at School:

Many girls face not only personal challenges but also an educational environment that sometimes resists the emotional support they critically need. Teachers who strive to build caring and trusting relationships play a vital role in boosting girls' confidence and academic success. However, in many orthodox schools that adhere to old methods, such relationships are often misunderstood or viewed with suspicion by colleagues and management (Education International, 2022). This creates an atmosphere that discourages innovative and empathetic teaching methods, which are essential for nurturing students' emotional and academic growth.

Fortunately, modern education increasingly embraces approaches such as social-emotional learning and mindfulness. These methods combine academic instruction with emotional support, helping students develop resilience, self-awareness and confidence, qualities especially important for girls dealing with various pressures (Suraasa, 2024). It is crucial for schools, families, and communities to update their perspectives and recognize the value of these approaches. Supporting teachers who move beyond outdated methods to genuinely connect with and uplift their students will create a more nurturing and effective learning environment.

13. School Dropouts:

Education is the most powerful tool to uplift girls, yet dropout rates remain troublingly high in India. UDISE+ data from 2021-22 shows that the dropout rate at the secondary level for girls is around 12.6%, with rural areas reporting even higher percentages (Ministry of Education, 2022). Reasons range from early marriage, household chores, unsafe travel to school and lack of proper sanitation facilities. For example, many schools lack functional toilets for girls, making it difficult for them to manage menstruation while attending school, leading to absenteeism and dropouts (UNICEF India, 2022). Family poverty, gender biases prioritizing boys' education, and socio-cultural norms often assign girls to domestic duties or early marriage, limiting their academic and career potential (Smile Foundation, 2023).

Efforts by NGOs and government programs have made progress. Community awareness, scholarships, safe transportation and girl-friendly toilets encourage girls to stay in school (UNICEF India, 2021). The story of villages in the Thar desert illustrates this impact: once plagued by early marriages and dropouts, many have transformed into child-marriage-free communities with girls completing secondary education and achieving dreams (Girls Not Brides, 2018). Scaling such interventions nationally is essential to create safe educational pathways for all girls.

14. Employment Inequality and Political Underrepresentation:

Women and girls in India continue to face significant barriers in both employment and political representation. Only about one in three women hold paid jobs, often in low-wage, insecure positions with minimal benefits or workplace safety (MOSPI, 2024). Societal norms and family restrictions discourage many girls from entering the workforce, while wage gaps and lack of facilities like childcare further undermine women's economic empowerment. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened this situation, causing widespread job losses for women and multiplying unpaid domestic duties.

In parallel, women remain vastly underrepresented in political leadership, occupying just 15% of national parliament seats and fewer local government roles (Statista, 2023). Social attitudes, insufficient family support, and hostile political climates discourage girls and women from pursuing political careers (UN Women, 2023). This underrepresentation limits their influence on policies related to gender equality, employment rights and social welfare.

To overcome these intertwined challenges, it is essential to promote safe and equitable workplaces, provide leadership development programs, enforce anti-discrimination laws and foster supportive environments encouraging political participation. Empowering girls to envision themselves as both contributors in the economy and leaders in governance will create a more inclusive and equitable society.

15. Superstitions, Black Magic and Social Stigma:

In many Indian communities, girls face harmful social beliefs and superstitions that negatively impact their lives, well-being and social freedom. Such beliefs often result in discrimination, isolation, or accusations that can cause emotional distress and restrict girls' autonomy. Families may suspect girls of being victims of black magic or curses, especially when they form friendships or relationships that go against traditional norms (Chavan, 2025). This suspicion can lead to unjust surveillance, restrictions on social interactions and stigmatization.

For instance, a common scenario involves girls suspected of being under black magic influence after associating with boys, leading families to treat them with fear and mistrust. Such superstitions divert focus from addressing real issues such as gender norms, communication gaps and emotional support for girls (Chavan, 2025). These beliefs perpetuate gender discrimination and prevent girls from accessing needed psychological and social support.

Combating these harmful practices requires culturally sensitive community education and awareness campaigns that challenge myths and promote evidence-based understanding (UNICEF, 2023). Counselling services tailored to address fears stemming from superstition can help girls and their families overcome stigma and foster trust (NIMHANS, 2023). Addressing superstition and stigma with empathy and respect is crucial to protecting girls' rights and enhancing their well-being.

16. Cyber Harassment:

With the rise of internet use, many girls face new risks online, including cyber harassment, bullying, stalking and misuse of private information. In recent years, thousands of cases have been reported where girls and women received threatening messages or had photos shared without consent (NCW, 2023). This online abuse causes fear, anxiety and sometimes leads girls to withdraw from social media or other digital platforms entirely.

Cyber harassment is especially harmful because it can happen anytime, reaching girls even in the safety of their homes. Often, victims don't know how to report abuse or fear they won't be taken seriously. Protecting girls online requires cyber safety education, robust laws, quick legal action against offenders, and accessible support systems like helplines and counselling services (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2024). Teaching digital literacy alongside creating respectful online environments empowers girls to use technology safely and confidently.

17. Single Parenting, Adoption and Staying Alone:

In India, many young women are choosing single parenting, adoption, or living alone when they cannot marry the person they truly love due to societal pressures, family expectations, lack of support, or not finding someone like the one they once loved. These bold choices show their desire to protect their freedom and follow their hearts rather than settle for unwanted marriages, but they face stigma, financial challenges and judgment. Society must respect these decisions and learn to value true love to help girls live with dignity.

Around 4.5 crore women in India are lone mothers, a number growing as young women reject arranged marriages that conflict with their true love or personal values (MOSPI, 2024). Societal norms, such as caste, religion, or economic status, often block girls from marrying their chosen partners, with 80% of marriages still arranged and many facing family opposition to love marriages (Pew Research Center, 2021). Instead of finding someone else, some girls choose single parenting or adoption to build families on their own terms, with over 1,200 adoptions by single women recorded in 2023 (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2023). Others opt to stay alone, especially in urban areas, where education and jobs offer independence from family pressures (Oxfam India, 2020).

To support these girls, India needs campaigns to reduce stigma and promote acceptance of non-traditional paths (UN Women, 2023). Affordable childcare, legal aid for adoption and safe housing can ease their burdens (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2024). Job and education programs can help girls sustain their independence (International Labour Organization, 2024). Many girls choose to stay alone or raise children on their own because they dream of a life with true love, not pain or control. Our society has broken their hearts by ignoring their wishes, silencing their voices and pushing them with rules like caste, family pressure, or fear of shame. We are the reason they walk this lonely path and it's time we open our eyes to our failure. If we want to change the perspective on why many girls today are following this trend, we must begin by listening to them, to their hopes, their loves and their struggles and by breaking the barriers that make independence seem like their only path to safety and freedom (Pew Research Center, 2021; Oxfam India, 2020).

The Superpower of Being a Girl

Indian girls, even when they face big challenges, show an amazing strength built on empathy, creativity, courage and determination. From a young age, many take on many responsibilities at once. They balance household work, studies and social expectations with resilience. For example, girls in rural India often wake up before sunrise to fetch water or care for siblings, yet still go to school. This shows their ability to multitask and stay strong (UNICEF India, 2024). Their emotional intelligence helps them form deep bonds and maintain peace in families and communities, even in tough times. This resilience can be seen in how they face physical and emotional challenges like menstruation, which can feel painful and isolating where sanitation and awareness are lacking. Later, many women take on the difficult journey of childbirth, showing once again their physical and emotional strength (Smile Foundation, 2023). These experiences, often ignored, highlight a unique power that prepares girls to be natural leaders and problem-solvers when given the chance.

This inner strength leads to achievements across India. Education programs like Educate Girls have helped over 1.5 million girls, especially from rural and poor families, enter schools and continue studies. In places once known for child marriage, communities are now creating opportunities for girls (UNICEF Data, 2025). In Rajasthan's Barmer district, some villages have even declared themselves child-marriage-free, with girls finishing school and becoming teachers, doctors and professionals (Girls Not Brides, 2018). In science and technology, girls are breaking barriers through initiatives like the UNESCO-supported "Girls in AI" program, where young innovators create apps to solve problems such as water shortage and healthcare, gaining global recognition (UNESCO, 2023). In sports, Hima Das rose from a small village in Assam to become an international sprinter, inspiring thousands of girls to break stereotypes. Young activists like Licypriya Kangujam from Manipur have also gained worldwide recognition for their fight against climate change, proving that Indian girls can be global leaders (UNICEF India, 2024).

The benefits of empowering girls go beyond individual success. They uplift families, communities and the whole country. Educating girls reduces child marriage rates, lowers maternal and infant deaths and strengthens communities through their economic contributions. Closing the gender gap in education could add \$770 billion to India's economy by 2030, as educated girls become entrepreneurs, professionals and leaders (World Bank, 2024). Socially, when women take part in local governance, which is now at 50% in some states, policies on education, healthcare and women's safety improve (Statista, 2023). Girls are also leading cultural change through art, writing and activism. Poets like Aranya Johar use spoken word to address gender inequality, inspiring many to change their views. These examples show how girls, when supported, can lift entire communities out of poverty and build inclusive progress (NITI Aayog, 2023).

To fully use this potential, India must break harmful stereotypes and make systemic changes. This means ensuring access to quality education, safe healthcare and secure environments where girls can grow. Policies like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao have helped, but more must be done, including scholarships, safe transport and girl-friendly schools (Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, 2024). Communities also need to challenge old mindsets and celebrate the ambitions of girls, whether in science, sports or leadership. Families, schools and local leaders should create supportive spaces where girls feel valued and heard. The stories of girls who code, play, write and lead show that investing in them is not only right but also important for India's future. As more of these stories grow, Indian girls light the way toward a fairer and more successful nation, inspiring future generations to believe in their worth and possibilities (Smile Foundation, 2023).

Policy Recommendations

Addressing the challenges faced by girls and harnessing their potential requires comprehensive and sustained policy efforts. Key recommendations include:

Strengthen Access and Retention: Implement targeted programs to ensure girls enrol in school early and remain through secondary and higher education levels. Special focus is needed on rural and marginalized communities to reduce dropout rates caused by economic or social pressures (Ministry of Education, 2022).

Improve School Infrastructure: Ensure schools have gender-sensitive facilities such as separate toilets, safe drinking water and secure transportation. This creates a girl-friendly environment that encourages attendance and participation (National Education Policy, 2020).

Promote Gender-Responsive Pedagogy and Supportive Teachers: Train and encourage teachers to adopt gender-sensitive, empathetic and innovative teaching methods that address girls' emotional and academic needs. Support and value educators who think outside the box and build trusting relationships with students, as these approaches significantly enhance girls' confidence, resilience and learning outcomes (Education International, 2022).

Provide Financial Incentives and Scholarships: Expand scholarships, stipends and conditional cash transfers for families to reduce the economic burden of girls' education and discourage early marriage (Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, 2015).

Engage Communities and Families: Conduct awareness campaigns and counselling sessions to shift social norms that limit girls' education and reinforce traditional gender roles. Community involvement is critical to sustaining behavioural change (UNICEF India, 2024; Smile Foundation, 2023).

Enhance Vocational and Skill-Based Training: Integrate vocational education and life skills to equip girls with employability skills and economic independence, fostering long-term empowerment (UNESCO, 2023).

Monitor and Evaluate: Collect and use gender-based data to track progress, find gaps and adjust policies at state and district levels, making sure actions are accountable and focused (Ministry of Education, 2022).

Limitations of the Study

While this study attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of the challenges and strengths of girls in India, there are certain limitations to acknowledge:

Data Scope and Availability: Reliable data at the granular level (district or village) may be limited, affecting a detailed understanding of regional disparities in girls' education and empowerment.

Methodological Constraints: The study relies heavily on secondary sources, policy documents and reported statistics, which may not capture real-time or grassroots-level complexities.

Cultural and Social Variability: The diversity of India's cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic contexts means findings may not generalize uniformly across all regions or communities.

Evolving Context: Rapid changes in policy and society could mean some information becomes outdated quickly, necessitating continuous monitoring and updates.

Focus Limitations: The study primarily emphasizes education and social challenges, with extensive coverage of issues like school dropouts, child marriage and societal norms. While health concerns such as mental health, anaemia and menstrual health are addressed in detail, legal protection and economic participation are explored to a lesser extent, focusing on specific laws and employment barriers rather than systemic analyses.

Acknowledging these limitations is crucial for contextualizing conclusions, and future research should aim to use longitudinal data, primary fieldwork and inclusive methodologies to build on this foundation.

Conclusion

The journey of girls in India closely mirrors the life of a butterfly, moving through distinct phases, overcoming challenges and ultimately taking flight with beauty, strength and resilience. Each struggle, whether visible or hidden, forges a spirit capable of touching lives and shaping communities, just as the butterfly effect demonstrates how small acts of courage and hope can create waves of change in society. Progress made in girls' education, leadership, and empowerment shows that every girl holds the potential for transformation. With the support of families, communities, forward-thinking teachers and inclusive policies, these transformations are not only possible but inevitable. Science and experience both confirm that support systems, mentors, advocates and caring adults, play a crucial role in helping girls realize their dreams and power. As someone who cares deeply and sees a butterfly in every growing girl, it is important to remind them that they are never alone on this journey. There is always someone listening, ready to help and guide. Voices of encouragement and solidarity form the foundation of progress. By recognising this collective strength and continuing to nurture it, we can ensure that every girl will one day soar, bringing colour and life to the world around her.

To strengthen this vision, future research should explore a wider range of girls' experiences across different regions, using direct stories from girls to better understand their challenges and dreams. Studies could also look at how other countries support girls, adapting those ideas for India. To make progress, governments and communities need to build safer schools, improve healthcare, and create fair opportunities for girls to learn, work and lead. Families and teachers should encourage girls to follow their ambitions, creating a world where they feel valued and supported. These efforts will help every girl unlock her potential, building a brighter and fairer future for all.

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