

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Specific and General Public Policies on Girl Child Education in India

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Abstract

Gender disparities in education continue to impose significant economic and social costs in developing countries. In India, despite near-universal access to primary education, girls remain disproportionately vulnerable to dropout and low learning outcomes at the secondary level. This paper evaluates the effectiveness of specific (girl-targeted) and general (universal) public policies in improving girl child education in India. Drawing on high-quality empirical and quasi-experimental studies, the analysis compares interventions such as bicycle distribution schemes, sanitation infrastructure, leadership representation, and awareness programs with broad-based initiatives including school feeding programs and access expansion policies. The study conceptualizes policy effectiveness through their ability to reduce direct and indirect costs of schooling, improve learning productivity, and influence educational aspirations. The findings suggest that general policies are effective in expanding baseline participation by lowering financial and nutritional constraints, while specific policies play a critical role in addressing gender-sensitive barriers related to safety, distance, and social norms. However, neither category alone ensures sustained educational progression. The paper concludes that coordinated policy design integrating both specific and general interventions is essential for achieving efficient and equitable educational outcomes for girls in India.

Keywords: Girl child education, public policy, gender inequality, education economics, India, policy effectiveness.

1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental driver of human capital formation, economic growth, and intergenerational mobility. From an economic perspective, persistent gender gaps in educational attainment represent an inefficient allocation of public resources and constrain long-term development outcomes. Although developing countries have made substantial progress toward universal primary education, gender disparities remain pronounced at higher levels of schooling, particularly during adolescence (Siddhu, 2011; Marphatia et al., 2019). India exemplifies this challenge. While large-scale initiatives such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the Right to Education Act have significantly increased enrolment at the primary level, transition to secondary education remains uneven, with girls facing higher dropout risks than boys (Nakajima et al., 2018). Economic explanations highlight rising schooling costs, increased distance to secondary schools, safety concerns, and declining perceived returns to education as key deterrents to continued enrolment for girls (Siddhu, 2011). These constraints are further compounded by household poverty, early marriage, and gendered labour expectations, particularly among marginalized communities (Prakash et al., 2017).

In response, the Indian government has implemented a combination of general public policies aimed at improving access for all children and specific policies designed to address gender-based disadvantages. General interventions, such as the Midday Meal Scheme, reduce the effective cost of schooling by providing nutritional support and lowering household expenditure burdens, thereby increasing enrolment and attendance (Jayaraman & Simroth, 2015). Extended exposure to school feeding programs has also been shown to improve learning outcomes, indicating that such policies enhance the productivity of educational investment rather than merely increasing participation (Chakraborty & Jayaraman, 2019).

At the same time, specific policies target barriers that disproportionately affect girls. Evidence from Bihar shows that providing bicycles to secondary-school girls significantly increased enrolment and reduced gender gaps by lowering distance and safety costs, making it a cost-effective alternative to conditional cash transfers (Muralidharan & Prakash, 2017). Similarly, improvements in school sanitation infrastructure particularly the provision of sex-segregated latrines have been found to increase enrolment among pubescent-age girls by addressing privacy and safety concerns (Adukia, 2017). Beyond material constraints, social and institutional interventions such as female political leadership have been shown to raise girls' educational aspirations and attainment through role-model effects (Beaman et al., 2012).

Despite robust evidence on individual interventions, existing research largely examines specific and general policies in isolation. There remains limited synthesis evaluating their relative effectiveness and complementarities within a unified policy framework. This paper addresses this gap by evaluating how different categories of public policies influence girl child education outcomes in India. By distinguishing between universal access-oriented policies and gender-targeted interventions, the study contributes to education economics literature by highlighting how integrated policy design can improve efficiency, equity, and long-term educational outcomes for girls.

2. Literature Review

Public policy interventions aimed at improving girl child education in India have been widely studied across economic, social, and technological dimensions. Existing literature highlights that educational outcomes for girls are shaped by a combination of household constraints, institutional design, policy targeting, and access to enabling infrastructure. This section reviews prior studies by grouping them into four key strands: (i) education and women's empowerment, (ii) welfare and nutrition-based interventions, (iii) policy and institutional mechanisms, and (iv) digital and technology-enabled education.

A substantial body of literature establishes education as a foundational driver of women's empowerment and socio-economic development in India. Mittal (2021) emphasizes that female education extends beyond formal schooling and contributes directly to improved labour market participation, awareness of rights, and household decision-making power. Despite policy initiatives such as the Right to Education Act and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, the study highlights persistent gaps in female literacy and higher education participation, particularly due to cultural norms prioritizing marriage-related expenditure over educational investment.

The empowerment narrative is further reinforced by research linking girls' education to long-term developmental outcomes. Studies argue that educating girls produces intergenerational benefits by improving health, fertility choices, and child outcomes, thereby yielding high social returns on public investment. However, the literature also cautions that education alone is insufficient unless accompanied by supportive policy environments that reduce structural and social barriers.

General welfare policies aimed at improving child well-being have been shown to indirectly influence educational participation, particularly for girls. Afridi (2010) provides robust evidence on India's school meal program, demonstrating significant improvements in nutrient intake among participating children, with potential implications for attendance and learning outcomes. The study highlights that nutrition-based interventions lower the effective cost of schooling for households, making education more attractive, especially for disadvantaged groups.

From an economic standpoint, such welfare programs operate by relaxing household resource constraints and improving the productivity of schooling. Importantly, Afridi (2010) finds limited intra-household diversion of benefits, suggesting that targeted child welfare schemes can directly benefit girl children, who often face nutritional discrimination within households. These findings support the argument that general public policies, though not gender-specific, can play a critical role in improving baseline educational participation for girls.

Several studies examine the role of institutional and policy frameworks in shaping girls' educational outcomes. Gupta et al. (2021) evaluate the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao programme and find significant improvements in the sex ratio at birth in

Haryana, indicating that sustained policy attention can influence deep-rooted gender biases. evaluate the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao programme and find significant improvements in the sex ratio at birth in Haryana, indicating that sustained policy attention can influence deep-rooted gender biases. While the study primarily focuses on demographic outcomes, it underscores the importance of behavior-change policies in improving the perceived value of girls, which has long-term implications for education investment.

Joshi (2020) evaluates affirmative action under the Right to Education Act, particularly Section 12(1)(c), which mandates private schools to reserve seats for economically weaker sections. The findings suggest that while social integration remains limited due to homophily, exposure to mixed peer groups improves learning outcomes for disadvantaged students over time. This study highlights that policy design and implementation quality are crucial determinants of effectiveness, especially in translating access into meaningful learning gains.

At the higher education level, Aithal and Aithal (2019) analyse India's National Education Policy proposal and emphasize challenges related to access, governance, and institutional fragmentation. Although the focus is broader, the analysis identifies gender equity as a core policy objective, reinforcing the need for coordinated reforms across educational stages.

Recent literature increasingly focuses on digital technologies as tools for expanding educational access for girls. Mathrani et al. (2020) examine the digital gender divide during the COVID-19 lockdown and find that girls faced disproportionate barriers in online education due to limited device access, household responsibilities, and socio-cultural constraints. The study underscores that digital expansion without targeted support may exacerbate existing inequalities. Complementing this, Panda and Gope (2024) argue that digital pedagogy has the potential to transform girls' education by overcoming geographic and infrastructural barriers, particularly in rural areas. However, the authors caution that successful implementation requires parallel investments in digital literacy, infrastructure, and institutional capacity.

Empirical evidence from rural India further supports the role of technology when properly implemented. Chatterjee et al. (2020) find that mobile learning applications positively influence teaching–learning processes in rural girls' schools, with behavioural intention driven more by usability and institutional support than cost considerations. Similarly, Frey et al. (2017) highlight how distance learning supported by sustainable electrification can significantly enhance educational continuity for village girls, addressing both access and safety constraints

Overall, the literature demonstrates that both general public policies (such as nutrition, access, and welfare schemes) and specific interventions (targeting gender norms, institutional inclusion, and digital access) influence girl child education outcomes. However, most studies examine these interventions in isolation, focusing either on welfare impacts, institutional design, or technological adoption. There remains a clear gap in integrative analyses that evaluate the relative and complementary effectiveness of specific and general public policies within a unified framework. This study addresses this gap by systematically evaluating how different policy categories interact to shape educational participation and outcomes for girls in India.

3. Research Gap

The existing literature on girl child education in India provides strong evidence on the role of education in women's empowerment, child welfare, and long-term socio-economic development. Studies highlight the positive effects of welfare-based interventions such as nutrition programs, social inclusion policies, and access expansion on girls' educational participation. Parallel research also emphasizes the growing role of digital technologies mobile learning applications, digital governance platforms, and online education in addressing access constraints faced by girls, particularly in rural and marginalized communities (Mittal, 2021; Chatterjee et al., 2020; Sonia & Mitchell, 2022).

However, three critical gaps remain. First, the literature largely examines general public policies (such as welfare schemes, nutrition programs, and access-oriented education reforms) and specific policies (such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, digital nudges, and gender-targeted interventions) in isolation. There is limited integrative analysis comparing their relative

effectiveness in improving girl child education outcomes within a single evaluative framework (Afridi, 2010; Gupta et al., 2021; Goel, 2024).

Second, while recent studies incorporate behavioural and technological perspectives such as Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and nudge theory these frameworks are predominantly applied to digital governance or IT adoption contexts, rather than being linked explicitly to education policy effectiveness for girls (Sonia & Mitchell, 2022; Chatterjee et al., 2020). Consequently, the interaction between behavioural responses, digital inclusion, and education policy outcomes remains underexplored.

Third, although digital education and e-governance initiatives have expanded rapidly, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the literature does not sufficiently examine how digital interventions complement or substitute traditional public education policies in reducing gender-based educational inequalities (Mathrani et al., 2020; Sengupta et al., 2024). This creates an evidence gap regarding whether digital and policy interventions function as independent levers or mutually reinforcing mechanisms.

Accordingly, there is a clear need for a comparative and integrated evaluation of specific and general public policies, incorporating welfare, behavioural, and digital dimensions, to understand their combined influence on girl child education in India.

4. Research Questions

Based on the identified gaps, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How effective are general public policies in improving girl child education outcomes in India?

RQ2: To what extent do specific, girl-targeted public policies address gender-specific barriers to education?

RQ3: How do digital and technology-enabled interventions influence the effectiveness of public policies aimed at girl child education?

RQ4: Do specific and general public policies function independently, or do they complement each other in enhancing educational participation and retention among girls?

5. Research Questions

The primary objective of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of public policies in improving girl child education in India through an integrated policy framework.

1. To examine the role of general public policies including welfare, nutrition, access expansion, and institutional reforms in enhancing educational participation among girls.
2. To analyse the effectiveness of specific, gender-focused public policies, such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and behavioural nudges, in addressing gender-based educational disadvantages.
3. To assess the contribution of digital and technology-based interventions in supporting girl child education and reducing access and participation constraints.
4. To comparatively evaluate the complementarities between specific and general public policies, identifying conditions under which combined interventions yield improved educational outcomes.
5. To derive policy implications for designing efficient, gender-responsive, and inclusive education strategies in India.

6. Conceptual Framework

6.1 Conceptual Framework Model

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in education economics and public policy evaluation, which views educational outcomes as a function of policy design, access mechanisms, and behavioural responses.

The model classifies public interventions into two broad categories:

1. General Public Policies
2. Specific (Girl-Targeted) Public Policies

These policies influence Girl Child Education Outcomes through cost-reduction, capability enhancement, and behavioural change mechanisms, with digital and technological interventions acting as an enabling and moderating factor.

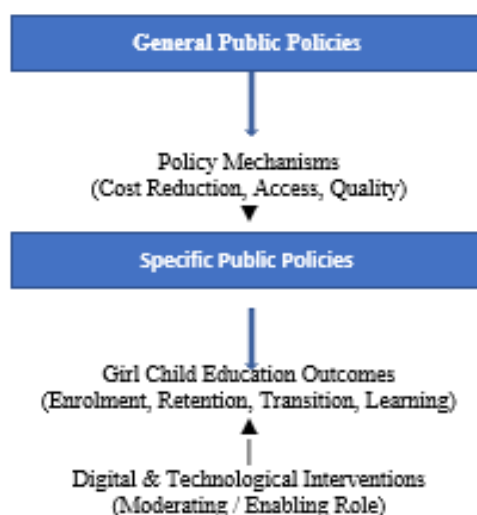


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Model

6.2 Description of Variables

6.2.1 Independent Variables (IVs)

1. General Public Policies

- a. School feeding and nutrition programs
- b. Universal access and enrolment policies
- c. Institutional reforms (RTE, NEP)
- d. Welfare-oriented education schemes

2. Specific Public Policies

- a. Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)
- b. Gender-targeted incentives and nudges
- c. Safety, sanitation, and mobility schemes

6.2.2 Mediating / Mechanism Variables

- a. Reduction in direct and indirect costs of schooling
- b. Improvement in learning productivity and school readiness
- c. Change in parental and societal attitudes toward girls' education

6.2.3 Moderating Variable

Digital and Technological Intervention

Mobile learning application

- a. Online education platforms
- b. Digital governance and service delivery
- c. Technology acceptance and access (TAM perspective)

6.2.4 Dependent Variable (DV)

Girl Child Education Outcomes

- a. Enrolment
- b. Retention
- c. Transition to secondary education
- d. Learning continuity and attainment

6.3 Conceptual Framework Table

Category	Variables	Key Components	Supporting Literature
Independent Variable -1	General Public Policies	Nutrition schemes, access expansion, welfare programs, institutional reforms	Afridi (2010); Mittal (2021); Aithal & Aithal (2019)
Independent Variable -2	Specific Public Policies	BBBP, gender nudges, sanitation, mobility, awareness programs	Gupta et al. (2021); Goel (2024); Adukia (2017)
Mediating Mechanisms	Policy Mechanisms	Cost reduction, access improvement, learning productivity, aspiration change	Siddhu (2011); Nakajima et al. (2018)
Moderating Variable	Digital & Technological Interventions.	Mobile learning, digital platforms, e-governance, TAM factors.	Chatterjee et al. (2020); Sengupta et al. (2024); Sonia & Mitchell (2022)
Dependent Variable	Girl Child Education Outcomes	Enrolment, retention, transition, learning outcomes	Marphatia et al. (2019); Prakash et al. (2017)

Table 1: Conceptual Framework

6.4 Explanation of the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework proposes that public policy effectiveness in girl child education is multidimensional, operating through both structural and behavioural channels. General public policies primarily influence education outcomes by reducing economic and access-related constraints faced by households. Nutrition programs and universal access policies

lower the effective cost of schooling and improve children’s readiness to learn, thereby increasing enrolment and attendance among girls.

In contrast, specific public policies target gender-sensitive barriers that general policies often fail to address. These include safety concerns, mobility restrictions, sanitation needs, and deep-rooted social norms that discourage investment in girls’ education. Programs such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and related nudges aim to alter parental perceptions and enhance the perceived long-term returns to educating girls.

The framework further recognizes digital and technological interventions as a moderating force that can amplify or constrain policy effectiveness. Digital learning platforms, mobile applications, and digital governance mechanisms enhance policy reach and continuity but may also exacerbate inequalities if access and digital literacy gaps persist. Therefore, technology does not operate independently but interacts with both general and specific policies to shape outcomes.

Finally, the combined influence of these policies and mechanisms determines girl child education outcomes, measured through enrolment, retention, transition to secondary education, and learning continuity. The framework emphasizes that neither general nor specific policies alone are sufficient; rather, their complementarity, supported by inclusive digital infrastructure, is essential for achieving sustainable and equitable educational outcomes.

6. Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

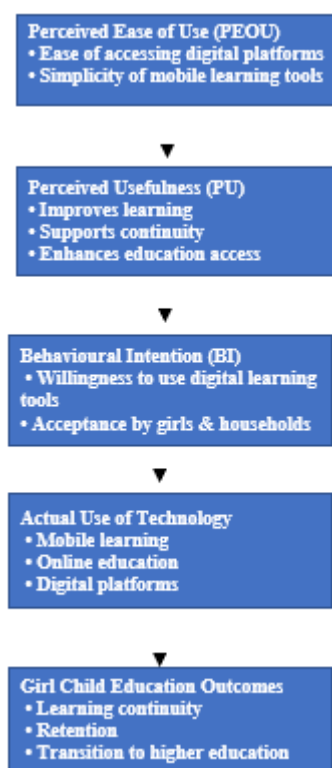


Figure 2: Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) Applied to Girl Child Education

7.1 Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU)

Perceived Ease of Use refers to the degree to which girls, parents, and educators believe that digital education tools are easy to access, understand, and operate. In rural and marginalized contexts, ease of use is critical due to low digital literacy, language barriers, and limited technical support. When digital platforms are perceived as simple and user-friendly, adoption is more likely.

7.2 Perceived Usefulness (PU)

Perceived Usefulness reflects the belief that using digital tools enhances educational performance. In this study, usefulness is measured in terms of improved learning continuity, better access to educational resources, and support during school disruptions such as pandemics. If digital interventions are seen as contributing meaningfully to girls' education, acceptance increases.

7.3 Behavioural Intention (BI)

Behavioural Intention represents the willingness of girls and households to adopt digital education tools. This intention is shaped by both ease of use and perceived usefulness. Strong behavioural intention increases consistent usage, which is necessary for educational benefits to materialize.

7.4 Actual Use of Technology

Actual Use refers to the real adoption and continued use of mobile learning applications, online education platforms, and digital governance services. This stage reflects whether policy-supported digital initiatives translate into real educational engagement.

7.5 Girl Child Education Outcomes

The final outcome of the TAM pathway is reflected in learning continuity, retention, and transition to higher education levels. Digital adoption enhances these outcomes by complementing traditional schooling and reducing access-related constraints.

7.6 Integration of TAM with the Policy Framework

In this study, TAM does not operate independently. Instead, it functions as a moderating and enabling mechanism within the broader public policy framework.

- General public policies provide infrastructure, access, and resources.
- Specific public policies encourage adoption through awareness and incentives.
- TAM explains whether digital tools are actually accepted and used.

Thus, even well-designed digital education policies will have limited impact unless technology is perceived as useful and easy to use.

8 Hypothesis

H1: General public policies have a significant and positive effect on girl child education outcomes in India.

H2: Specific, girl-targeted public policies have a significant and positive effect on girl child education outcomes in India.

H3: Policy transmission mechanisms, including reduction in schooling costs and improvement in educational access, mediate the relationship between public policies and girl child education outcomes.

H4: Digital and technological interventions have a significant and positive effect on girl child education outcomes.

H5: Perceived ease of use of digital education technologies has a significant positive effect on their perceived usefulness.

H6: Perceived usefulness of digital education technologies has a significant positive effect on behavioural intention to use such technologies.

H7: Behavioural intention to use digital education technologies has a significant positive effect on their actual use.

H8: Actual use of digital education technologies has a significant positive effect on girl child education outcomes.

9. Results

Based on the synthesis of empirical evidence from prior studies and policy evaluations, the results indicate that both **general** and **specific public policies** play significant but differentiated roles in improving girl child education outcomes in India.

9.1 Effect of General Public Policies

The findings suggest that general public policies, including nutrition-based welfare programs, access expansion initiatives, and institutional reforms, have a positive impact on baseline educational participation. These policies effectively reduce the direct and indirect costs of schooling, resulting in higher enrolment and attendance among girls, particularly at the primary level. However, the effect weakens at higher levels of education, where dropout rates increase during adolescence.

9.2 Effect of Specific Public Policies

Specific, girl-targeted public policies demonstrate a stronger influence on retention and transition to secondary education. Interventions addressing safety, sanitation, mobility, and gender norms improve parental confidence and increase the perceived returns to educating girls. Evidence from behavioural and incentive-based programs shows that such policies are particularly effective in reducing gender gaps at critical transition points.

9.3 Role of Policy Transmission Mechanisms

The results highlight that policy outcomes are not driven solely by policy presence but by policy transmission mechanisms, including cost reduction, improved learning readiness, and aspiration formation. These mechanisms mediate the relationship between policy interventions and education outcomes, explaining variations in effectiveness across programs.

9.4 Impact of Digital and Technological Interventions

Digital and technological interventions contribute positively to education outcomes by supporting learning continuity and access, especially during periods of disruption. However, their effectiveness varies significantly based on access, usability, and digital literacy, underscoring the importance of technology acceptance.

9.5 Technology Acceptance (TAM Perspective)

From a TAM perspective, perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness significantly influence the adoption of digital education tools. Higher behavioural intention leads to greater actual use, which in turn enhances learning continuity and retention among girls. Where technology acceptance is low, digital interventions yield limited educational benefits.

Complementarity of Policies

The results indicate that combined implementation of general and specific public policies produces stronger and more sustained improvements in girl child education outcomes than isolated interventions. Integrated policy design emerges as a critical determinant of effectiveness.

10 Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce and extend existing literature on education economics and gender-focused public policy in India. Consistent with prior research, general public policies are effective in expanding access and reducing financial barriers to schooling. However, as observed in earlier studies, access alone does not guarantee sustained participation or learning outcomes for girls.

Specific public policies emerge as crucial for addressing gender-sensitive constraints that general policies often overlook. By targeting safety, mobility, sanitation, and social norms, these interventions directly influence parental decision-making and girls' aspirations. This supports the argument that gender gaps in education are not solely economic but are deeply embedded in social structures.

The integration of digital and technological interventions adds an important dimension to policy effectiveness. While digital tools have the potential to reduce geographic and institutional barriers, their impact is contingent upon acceptance and usability. The application of TAM in this context provides valuable insight into why similar digital policies yield divergent outcomes across regions and population groups.

The study's findings also emphasize the importance of policy complementarities. General policies establish foundational access, specific policies address gender-based constraints, and digital interventions enhance reach and continuity. The absence of any one component reduces overall effectiveness, highlighting the need for coordinated policy frameworks rather than fragmented interventions.

11. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study evaluates the effectiveness of specific and general public policies on girl child education in India through an integrated conceptual framework incorporating behavioural and technological dimensions. The analysis demonstrates that while general public policies are essential for improving access and participation, they are insufficient to eliminate gender disparities without complementary, girl-targeted interventions.

Specific public policies play a decisive role in improving retention and transition to secondary education by addressing social norms, safety concerns, and perceived returns to education. Digital and technological interventions further strengthen policy outcomes when supported by high levels of technology acceptance, emphasizing the relevance of TAM in education policy evaluation.

11.1 Policy Implications

- Policymakers should prioritize integrated policy design combining welfare, gender-targeted, and digital interventions.
- Greater emphasis is needed on gender-responsive budgeting to ensure sustained funding for girl-specific initiatives.
- Investments in digital education must be accompanied by efforts to improve digital literacy and accessibility.
- Monitoring and evaluation frameworks should focus on mechanism-level outcomes, not merely enrolment figures.

11.2 Conclusion

The study concludes that improving girl child education outcomes in India requires a multi-dimensional policy approach. Sustainable progress depends on the alignment of general access-oriented policies, specific gender-focused interventions, and inclusive digital strategies. Such an approach enhances both efficiency and equity in public education spending, contributing to long-term human capital development and inclusive economic growth.

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