Article

# Exploring gender equity in higher education pedagogy: A co-constructed comparative case study of Kazakhstan and India

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## Abstract

Higher education spaces are embedded within the larger ecosystem of societies, and they simultaneously endorse, question, critique, and transform societal norms. Exploring gender equity in higher education curriculum and pedagogy involves examining the systemic, social, and cultural dynamics that influence gender disparities within academic spaces and society. Examining gender mainstreaming in higher education pedagogy is essential to address systemic biases, promote inclusive teaching practices, and ensure that all students, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities to succeed. A co-constructed comparative case study of Kazakhstan and India provides a unique lens to understand these disparities and devise strategies to address them. In this study, we analyzed data collected from two universities to understand the challenges and curriculum and pedagogic practices that can create more equitable spaces. By adopting a collaborative research approach, this comparative study reveals common challenges, successful strategies, and practices that can help create gender equity and inclusivity in higher education. Findings indicate that while gender awareness and sensitivity are in the minds of the stakeholders, they are not embedded in the curriculum. Data analysis further demonstrates the need to incorporate more representative voices from different genders across the curriculum, both as textual material and as more diverse faculty. We argue that deep-rooted patriarchal norms and systemic barriers that continue to hinder gender inclusivity can be addressed not by creating specific courses or programs but by a holistic, inclusive curriculum that embeds gender equity in every aspect of higher education.

**Keywords:** gender equity, higher education, inclusive curriculum, comparative study

## Introduction

This study was driven by the need to address education and gender equality issues, or lack thereof, in higher education institutions (HEIs) internationally. Our primary objective was to explore and collaboratively construct ways, means, and prospects of equitable, just, gender-sensitive higher education spaces and educational research. This article focuses on key findings about gender equality in higher education teaching and learning through an international cross-cultural comparative case study. We detail a comparative study conducted at an HEI in Kazakhstan and one in India, extending research on gender in the curriculum. As part of a larger, internationally funded project, *Gender on the Higher Education Learning Agenda Internationally: Co-Constructing Equitable Futures*, supported by the British Academy’s Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), this process and its outcomes have the potential to impact diverse regions, including Central Asia, South Asia, African, and Europe.

While Central and South Asian countries historically have different social and political makeup, some similarities exist. These countries provide an essential comparison and contrast for considering higher education curriculum and pedagogy. Traditionally, women in both countries have had central roles in the country's social makeup, yet they have a low social status (Anessova et al., 2024; Tharakan & Tharakan, 1975). In both contexts, when ‘foreign’ empires took over (Russia and Britain, respectively), a new frame of ‘modern’ education was introduced, and expectations of gender and class roles were redefined/changed. While India had a world-renowned university in the 5th century CE, women had limited access to education until British colonists introduced the modern education system. Various social and religious reformation movements also gave impetus to the education of the girl child (Bekbossinova, 2024; Siddiqi, 2021). In recent years, in India, the number of women who have opted for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) as a field of study has increased by over 50,000 — from around 10 million in 2017-2018 to over 10.5 million in 2019-2020 (Agrawal, 2021). Today, women in both countries face competing expectations of being professionals in a modern workplace and traditional–often submissive–homemakers (Darji et al., 2016; Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017).

To understand the transition in both countries, we focused on teaching and learning with research questions centered on gender inclusion (or absence) as related to curriculum and pedagogical practices across disciplines. As such, our research set out to answer four core questions:

* Where is gender present and absent in the curriculum focus and approach of the institutions?
* How is gender presented as an issue and awareness in curriculum focus and approach across the institutions?
* Which individuals, values, and agendas are driving the inclusion, rejection, and co-opting of gender as a curriculum focus and approach across the institutions?
* What are the challenges and opportunities in developing more gender-equitable approaches in the curriculum?

In developing these research questions, we were building upon an awareness of sociohistorical and current inequities throughout HEIs. Moreover, while stated goals of creating HEIs foster inclusivity, equity, diversity, and equality, gender sensitivity and gender mainstreaming continue to face challenges in institutions (MacKinnon, 2017; Wright, 2014). Historically, HEIs and university spaces have been identified as exclusionary and as instruments of social injustice and inequality (Leathwood & Read, 2009; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2022). Women and individuals identifying themselves as non-binary often face systemic barriers, including implicit biases and societal expectations, which limit their advancement in academia (Morley, 2013; O’Connor, 2020). In STEM disciplines, women continue to remain underrepresented due to structural inequalities, lack of mentorship opportunities, and discrimination, further reinforcing traditional gender norms (Dasgupta & Stout, 2014). Moreover, these implicit biases persist as women and other genders are routinely ignored for hiring and promotion. However, neo-liberal reforms and globalized education systems are creating diverse campuses that claim to create enabling and inclusive learning spaces (Knight, 2013; Naidoo & Williams, 2015). This changing scenario requires institutional reforms, inclusive policies, and active measures, including raising awareness across sections to promote gender equity at HEIs (Rodrigo & Clavero, 2022). We argue that reimagining curriculum and pedagogy in higher education institutions (HEIs) to make gender mainstreaming an integral part of institutional spaces can enhance inclusivity, equity, and diversity both within academia and as a means to raise awareness to help address systemic barriers and biases beyond HEIs in the broader society.

## Theoretical Framework: Feminist Theory and Intersectional Inequality

As foundational to this work, our theoretical framework draws from feminist theory and the recognition of persistent gender and wider inequalities within and beyond higher education (Costa Dias et al., 2020), the intersectional nature of this inequality, and the efforts of not reproducing problematic gendered discourses (Pereira, 2021). Intersectionality allows us to understand, question, and critique multiple interwoven systems of oppression that continue to influence how gender identities and roles are formed and sustained (Crenshaw, 1991; Verge et al., 2018). Gender intersects with categories like racialized grouping, class, caste, geography, disability, and sexual orientation to compound disadvantages for women and non-binary individuals, thus amplifying barriers to education, employment, and inclusion (Verge et al., 2018). By foregrounding feminist theory and intersectionality as methodological frameworks, we aim to understand how gender identities and lived experiences both within HEIs and outside are impacted in multiple ways, both by perpetuating and questioning societal norms that exist outside HEIs.

The cross-cultural project compares cases and institutions of higher education across disciplines and countries to explore practical and ineffective gendered practices and institutional structures. Through such a cross-cultural comparative case study, critical self-reflection and reflexivity are integral within and across teams (see CohenMiller, 2024; CohenMiller, Durrani et al., 2022; Tillmar, 2015). Reflexivity involves continuously examining our positionality as researchers, including our own cultural, gendered, and disciplinary lenses that may shape the interpretation and analysis of findings (CohenMiller & Grace, forthcoming; Jamieson et al., 2023; Rodrigo & Clavero, 2022). The study incorporates contextual reflexivity by analyzing the findings through the lenses of two countries with distinct historical and cultural contexts. Using reflexivity serves multiple purposes: to become aware of, articulate, and address our perspectives individually and collectively, thereby offering insights to those reading about our work and mitigating negative impact. Such a reflexive process draws from traditions in qualitative inquiry and feminist research where collaborative dialogue and mutual learning can promote the crossing of cultural boundaries and facilitate addressing systemic societal issues (e.g., CohenMiller & Boivin, 2021; Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2023; Taylor et al., 2020).

These theoretical frameworks deepen our understanding of how various forms of privilege and disadvantage intersect within educational institutions, influencing what is taught and how it is taught, thus allowing us to study and critique the development and implementation of policies and rules. For instance, efforts to create more gender-inclusive courses must also consider how other marginalized groups are represented - or excluded - in teaching materials and methods. It is imperative to contextualize gender locating its positionality in the various intersections of variables that constitute social, political, and educational contexts (Rodrigo & Clavero, 2022; Verge et al., 2018).

## Method: A Co-Constructed Research Process

In this comparative case study, our approach was multi-directional learning (O’Shea, 2016) within and between disciplines, institutions, and countries to collaboratively build new understandings and approaches (CohenMiller & Pate, 2019). The intention of such a cross-national approach is not a direct comparison, seeking out the most effective strategy, but complementary parallel case studies (Hantrais, 2009) as a powerful tool to generate new perspectives on existing challenges through the benefit of what might be learned from each other (Boddy et al., 2013). A co-constructed comparative case study of Kazakhstan and India provides a unique lens to understand these disparities and devise strategies to address them. While the former’s post-Soviet transitions and India’s British colonial history present a different set of issues and progress, both countries reveal common challenges, such as gender bias in curriculum and pedagogy. These allow for the development of effective policies and practices promoting gender equity in higher education and have global relevance.

### Context

Below, we share a brief note about the context of this study, locating the participants in the larger ecosystem that nurtures them and shapes their identity (more details about the participants are shared in the Appendix). HEIs spaces provide information, skills, support, and interpersonal ties that forge a complex network of relationships influencing student behavior, attitude, and stance (Duraiswamy, 2002; Pfaff-Czarnecka et al., 2022). Analyzing gender issues in HEIs is critical to addressing systemic inequities and gender imbalances, promoting diversity, and creating inclusive spaces that challenge embedded stereotypes while empowering disadvantaged and underrepresented groups (Morley, 2013; Pearse & Connell, 2015).

**The Kazakhstani Context and HEI**

Historically, Kazakhstan, a nomadic community, paid attention to women’s roles as crucial to the family, though women did not enjoy a good social status. Since becoming part of the Soviet Union, Kazakh society has seen a shift in gender roles, as Soviet-era reforms introduced gender equality in education, health care, and work, establishing a centralized higher education system that remains influential. Independence reforms since 1991 have included multiple steps (e.g., joining the Bologna Process), which have modernized Kazakhstan's higher education through credit systems and academic mobility (Dzhumabayeva, 2019; Gimranova et al., 2021; OECD, 2015). Despite achieving gender parity in education access and women predominating in teaching roles, leadership positions in academia remain male-dominated (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017), reflecting societal and cultural expectations (Abdikadyrova et al., 2018). Women in academia face dual pressures to embody Western professional norms and adhere to traditional family roles, hindering their advancement and perpetuating gender inequities (Durrani et al., 2022; Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017). While inclusive educational spaces are emphasized in Kazakhstan, a lack of understanding about creating inclusive higher education institutions persists (Jumakulov & Ashirbekov, 2016; Makoelle, 2020).

Our study was conducted at one of the first English-speaking universities in Kazakhstan. The total number of students in higher education in 2016-2017 was approximately 420,000, ranging in age from 18 to 29, and about 50% were women (Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2017). There is a gender balance of students, with more women represented in education and social sciences and men in the STEM fields (Nazarbayev University, 2021) and approximately 35% female faculty. Each university school was created in collaboration with renowned universities worldwide (e.g., the University of Cambridge, UK; the University of Pennsylvania, USA). Through these partnerships, a focus is the development of international cooperation and partnerships, including hiring international faculty and staff and conducting joint research projects. Examples of research and initiatives include the development of The Consortium of Gender Scholars and this GOTHELAI project.

**The Indian Context & HEI**

Like Kazakhstan, India has made significant progress in education since its independence from British rule in 1947, with literacy rates rising from 16% to 74% by 2011 (Census, 2011), although gender disparities persist (Ministry of Education, 2024, p. 20). Compared to men, women's representation decreases as we move from primary to higher education, with rural areas showing the most significant gaps due to factors like lack of amenities, early marriage, and limited access to schools (World Economic Forum, 2024). Government initiatives, such as the Right to Education Act and welfare schemes like Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana (National Savings Institute, 2022), aim to address these issues, resulting in increased female enrolment at the tertiary level (20.1% in 2011 to 30.2% in 2019). However, challenges remain, including limited representation of women in academic leadership, as only 3% of universities have women Vice-Chancellors. Government efforts continue to promote inclusivity through scholarships, reserved seats, and state-level programs (Government of West Bengal, 2022; Krishna, 2019; Priya, 2021), but similar to Kazakhstan, more concerted efforts and broader implementation are required to bridge the gaps and improve women’s social and academic position.

This research was conducted at a recently recognized prominent institution, a non-profit, research-intensive university established in 2009, with a faculty-student ratio 1:9 and a nearly equal gender distribution among students (49% female) and faculty (54% female). The university comprises 12 schools, hosts over 70 interdisciplinary research centers, and actively promotes gender inclusivity through initiatives like the Gender Studies Group (founded in 2015) and Awaaz-Women and Law Society (established in 2009). It organizes events such as “Gender Matters?” and has launched the Centre for Women’s Rights to foster gender equality. Additionally, it addresses sexual harassment via a dedicated committee that provides redressal mechanisms and conducts workshops to promote gender sensitization across campus. It is interesting to note how students and faculty in these educational and cultural contexts understand and negotiate gender sensitization as an idea and a way of life in higher education.

### Data Collection

In line with the principles of our funding through the GCRF and as feminist researchers, we set out with the aim of collaborative research design from the beginning of the research as an international, interdisciplinary team from Kazakhstan and India (the larger project also included teams from the UK, Nigeria, and Morocco). Our goal was to identify three academic disciplines (one science, one social science, and one humanities) across all partner universities. After receiving institutional ethical approval from the Universities, we invited teaching staff from within each discipline (n=7) and final-year undergraduate students (those anticipated to have the most extensive experience of being taught within their university) (n=7) to complete an anonymous online survey that included quantitative and qualitative responses, yielding a total of 42 institutional survey responses. While we recognize that gender is nuanced in being more than a binary between male and female, for this work, we have identified female, male, and other gender categories for survey and interview responses. These categories allowed for consistent use of phrasing across all country contexts. Moreover, these identifiers are a common starting point for gender audits and are intended to provide a reference point for readers alongside other critical aspects of participant identification.

Initial analysis of survey responses informed our design of interview questions for four teaching staff (three department Heads and one institutional teaching lead) and three student representatives within the university. Interviews were conducted online via Zoom, generating audio recordings and written transcripts automatically generated by the online platform. The transcription was then reread, clarified, and anonymized for analysis by each country team’s research assistant. To analyze the data, the entire team across universities and countries met to discuss the emerging themes of the qualitative and quantitative data collectively and iteratively in multiple meetings, cross-referencing the significance of each finding across data sets. The process of discussion of emerging findings was central to our work as feminist researchers, consistently seeking to hear from all members of the team and better understand the context and participants (CohenMiller, 2024; CohenMiller, Hinton-Smith et al., 2022; Dusdal & Powell, 2021; Goddard et al., 2006). Apart from our team discussions, we also held regular stakeholders’ meetings where we updated our stakeholders about the progress of our research and sought their feedback on taking the research further. Since our stakeholders came from diverse disciplinary and professional backgrounds, they provided us with insights crucial in ensuring the wider dissemination and impact of our work. We conducted data analysis using Excel for the broadest international team access, thus maintaining the same access to all data and analysis steps for all country teams.

## Analysis and Findings

This section offers an overview of the analysis and findings, drawing from relevant data to highlight participant interviews and survey responses. In Kazakhstan, findings highlight the struggle in the university to integrate concepts of gender equality within teaching and learning that mainly include conflicting views of responsibility for implementing policy and practice and who is included and excluded in the process. The most frequently cited challenges in staff and student surveys identify social constructs, underestimating women, gender stereotypes, social stigma, mentality and ideology of people, misogyny, and queer-phobia. The Kazakh Teaching Lead observed thaJt the responsibility lies with individuals rather than institutions to break systemic barriers and change deeply entrenched habits and ways of thinking. Throwing light on the many challenges women face, the Arts and Humanities faculty observed that though his female students show exemplary academic achievements, some implicit social and situational barriers prevent them from being in a leading position.

Many participants noted that despite being formally part of the learning and teaching strategy of the university, gender is not sufficiently covered in the curriculum. Moreover, gender is primarily reported by both staff and students as discipline-dependent and considered irrelevant to some individual courses or disciplines; thus, both staff and students do not perceive it as appropriate and essential to the learning agenda. As one science student noted, ‘In many universities, we have some clubs; for example, here at university, we have women in engineering clubs and such activities. I think it is what should be in the universities but nothing else. In our studies, from my point of view, we should not separate and focus on gender and other things that will separate the whole class…'. The social science professor shares the dilemma of seeing what he calls ‘gender neutrality’ in the disciplines he teaches, yet unable to use tools such as statistical instruments in a gender-neutral manner.

Data shows multiple ways in which participants perceived gender in the context of higher education. While all participants acknowledged that gender was an essential consideration in the development, there were split views on the importance of including gender-sensitive topics in their curriculum, citing constraints such as the number of topics they can teach (Social Science staff) or how including such topics might change the curriculum focus (Science student). However,Science students indicated that teachers should undergo training to become gender sensitive. The Social Science professor argued that issues of gender inclusivity should be introduced at least in high school because they believed it was “too late” for university students to learn to be sensitive.

When asked about the importance of gender in achieving broader social development goals, such as democracy and economic development, most women participants (62.5%), but only a quarter of men indicated gender as extremely important. Unlike most women (83%), less than 10% of male participants considered gender integral to the higher education curriculum. In contrast, most men (60%) indicated that gender should not be included in teaching and learning but depend on academic discipline.

Similarly, few participants reported that gender was necessary for higher education teaching and learning, especially in science. Interestingly, most participants identified the importance of gender in achieving broader development goals; further, they perceived that most of the work toward ensuring gender equality was managed by the collective efforts of teachers but should be the responsibility of the whole university community. The most significant challenges identified by the participants included the nature of policies, a finding echoed by that of Kazakhstan. While most participants were optimistic about working through these challenges, some highlighted the need for a more structural rather than surface-level approach. Unique to the Indian context, participants mentioned the need for an intersectional approach towards addressing gender-related issues, especially in the Indian context, since caste and class are significant categories interlocked with gender, furthering the marginalization of non-cis males.

In an interview from India, for instance, a social science student highlighted how gender disparity was not observed overtly but seemed inherent in the structure of the university space. Similarly, another social science student highlighted how women usually led the discussions around gender in the class, and men typically did not participate in these discussions. The male students justified their silence by claiming that gender is a sensitive issue, and they wanted to keep their distance from it. The student further highlighted that such an approach leaves out half of the population affected by the gender dynamics and makes women lose out on potential allies. Moreover, some participants indicated that disciplines like Sciences and Economics have been traditionally dominated by men, thus requiring not just inclusion but an overall restructuring. More importantly, the participants pointed out that simply including other genders in these disciplines does not guarantee ‘inclusivity.’ All faculty highlighted that when a course related to gender or caste is offered, students belonging to certain sections are expected to participate in these courses actively, and a lack thereof is perceived in a negative light as if it is the sole responsibility of these students to take up these courses.

The social science faculty from India highlighted the gap between the number of girls enrolled in the school education system and those who make it to HEIs. He also observed that in the last decade, despite women students having been more successful than male students at both the matriculation and senior secondary levels, their numbers dwindled at the advanced degree level. The faculty remarked that the lack of access to HE spaces could be one of the reasons why many female students discontinue their studies after completing secondary school education.

Views on the importance of gender in higher education are divided in both country contexts. In Kazakhstan, efforts to integrate gender equality into university teaching and learning face some challenges. Responses from staff and students highlight social constructs, underestimation of women, biases, stereotypes, and social stigma as significant obstacles. As one of the faculty noted, barriers are not systematic but stem from individual habits of mind, suggesting that the institution could make its venues more explicit to address these issues. Although there is a general understanding of gender’s role in development and social norms in Kazakhstan, opinions vary on its necessity in the curriculum. Gender issues are part of the university’s strategy, but the curriculum coverage is insufficient. Staff and students in Kazakhstan perceive gender relevance as discipline-dependent and often believe it inappropriate for specific courses. For instance, a science student mentioned that gender should not influence studies. In contrast, a social science professor felt unsure about incorporating gender into his discipline but expressed a willingness to learn more. Additionally, respondents suggested faculty training on gender issues. Others argue that gender education should start in high school to be effective.

Considering the gender gap in science fields, it was unsurprising to hear science students share that gender inclusion should be discipline-specific. For example, a male science student from Kazakhstan said, “I think we need some electives but not a very strict requirement for the curriculum,” a female science student from India echoed this view, saying, “The inclusion of gender is not obvious considering the ‘nature of our discipline.” When students were asked if they thought gender equality was represented in their discipline, most (65%) of science students disagreed. Most of the participants from Indian University also noted that disciplines like Economics, Business Studies, and Finance lack discussion around gender issues.

Conversely, students in some disciplines noted an effort towards including a gender focus. A female student (art and humanities) from Kazakhstan noticed that the university was becoming “an inclusive community that includes the LGBTQ community and, disabled people.” Besides students, our study included interviews with faculty and university curriculum leaders. The data analysis showed that faculty from Kazakhstan had different opinions regarding gender inclusion in the curriculum, and their opinion depended on their specialization. STEM representatives acknowledged that while they did not currently see the need for an inclusive curriculum, they were open to exploring the concept. They emphasized the necessity for clear guidelines on incorporating gender inclusively within the curriculum while sharing their reservations about a rigid top-down approach to teaching and curriculum design. On the other hand, the Social Sciences faculty from Kazakhstan expressed it challenging to include gender topics in his economics course. Other faculty members appeared interested in including gender issues more prominently but anticipated facing resistance from management in developing gender-specific courses and asked for additional training.

In contrast to the mixed responses from the surveys and interviews with faculty and students, the institutional heads and external stakeholders showed a clear commitment to gender in higher education in India and Kazakhstan. We talked with and invited these individuals to multiple meetings to share ongoing updates on the project and had opportunities to hear feedback about ongoing work at each academic institution. The stakeholders articulated their interest in enhancing gender and diversity in their context and frequently asked questions or offered suggestions. For instance, at one stakeholder and policy meeting, to indicate the importance of gender in curriculum development, there was a suggestion to include a question on course development forms about gender (e.g., How are you planning to embed gender and diversity in your course?). However, while many people in the meeting agreed with these suggestions, there have been no attempts to introduce the teaching and learning strategies in any country context. In other words, while there has been progress in accepting and conceptually allowing for dialogue about gender inclusivity, there needs to be more clarity on how to implement or incorporate this inclusivity in actual classroom discourse, curriculum design, hiring of faculty, and dismantling and restructuring social and institutional norms. Also, despite growing awareness about people identifying themselves with non-binary gender markers, most conversation and discussion about gender inclusivity restricts itself to understand gender to mean only women.

Overall, at both universities, academic development plans and gender-inclusive curriculum are some of the priorities. Faculty, Institutional Leads, and Stakeholder participants accepted that more than management support, collective responsibility by each participant in higher education is the only way to create gender equity in HEIs. Similarly, stakeholders and participants emphasized collaborative initiatives to foster inclusive campuses, including establishing gender support committees and redressal forums. In both country contexts, students and faculty broadly do not see a distinct place for gendered topics in higher education; however, they express a clear need to discuss gender as related to equity and inclusion across the curriculum and in all aspects of life at HEIs. Discourse further suggested that while some participants noted how gender could and should be included in more classes and universities, there was uncertainty about how this could be achieved and who would incorporate these ideas as part of the institution. Interestingly, most participants, including stakeholders, acknowledge the importance of gender inclusivity as a concept but cannot see its place in actual structures of curriculum design or more tangible infrastructural access. Through this study, we explored and identified where gender is present and absent in higher education curricula in Kazakhstan and Indian universities. It appears that gender is on the minds of many participants but not embedded within the higher education curriculum. In both contexts, gender is not approached broadly at either higher education institution, though Institutional Leads explicitly support gender inclusivity and gender-embedded curriculum.

## Discussion

As more and more women and groups that do not identify themselves as cis male join the workforce, it becomes imperative to develop a robust, new way of engaging with social norms and structures, reimagining them to accommodate the changing landscape of social patterns. A tool for national development, a fundamental right critical to our individual and societal growth, education and, by extension, curriculum development and implementation are critical to these endeavors. According to Cassese and Bos (2013) and Rios et al. (2010), empowering female students and challenging gender stereotypes requires the inclusion of women's voices, experiences, and recognition of women's contributions in the curriculum and course content. Pearse and Connell (2015) observe the lack of recognition of scholarship from what he calls the global periphery, which is a “structural problem of feminist thought on a world scale” (p. 52). While there is recognition of the many overlaps, complex and intersectional character of gender and how it is constantly reconfigured with clearly marked patterns of hegemony in distinct masculinities and femininities disparities (Pearse & Connell, 2015), we are yet to arrive at what Kannabiran and Swaminathan (2017) call “new sensibility” (p. 2). Despite continuous and consistent development in women’s education, disparities and discriminatory practices and processes that favor men over women and other genders persist, even in OECD countries (Fiske & UNESCO, 2012), and these are accentuated in non-periphery countries where gender differences amplify other kinds of inequalities (Kannabiran & Swaminathan, 2017). Even when societies engage with issues of gender discrimination, women continue to face “varying experiences of oppression and dominance, barriers and access” (Slatton & Brailey, 2019, p. 1) as “race” prevents marginalized women from being equal “beneficiaries of privileges and rights gained by the women’s rights movements” (Slatton & Brailey, 2019, p. 1). This alienation/discrimination/disadvantage is further enhanced within marginalized groups as their lives intersect with other oppressive subsets, such as caste, class, and region. This “intersectionality” highlights the overlapping of identities, showcasing multiple layers of oppression and violence embedded within society (see Crenshaw, 1991).

In the Indian context, access to HEIs is affected by several other reasons apart from gender, like caste, class, and religion (Sahu et al., 2017). For instance, Sahu and colleagues highlight that religion significantly determines women’s access to education in India. NSSO’s 2009-10 data show that approximately 72% of Muslim women in the country are literate, and within that subset, only 7.6% have graduate-level education (Sahu et al., 2017). Thus, an intersectional approach, as highlighted by some of the participants in the study, becomes crucial for capturing the relationship between socio-cultural and socio-economic categories (Crenshaw, 1989), both of which affect accessibility to HEIs. Some disciplines in both contexts are less accepting of gender inclusion in achieving gender equity and equality, which appears to be an implicit or passive resistance to the inclusion of gender in education (Verge et al., 2018). For gender mainstreaming in higher education, Morley (2010) emphasized how women should be assessed not as one analytical category but on a more intricate level. Verge et al. (2018) also agree that introducing a gender curriculum should intersect with other identity markers such as “race,” ethnicity, class, or sexual identity.

## Addressing the Gap: Recommendations and Conclusion

Recommendations from our study of Kazakhstani and Indian country higher education contexts demonstrate the need to incorporate more representative voices from different genders across the curriculum, both as textual material and more diverse faculty. This should be followed by implementing pedagogical practices that ensure these texts are read in the appropriate context. To address the uneven beliefs about gender in teaching and learning in the university, steps such as raising awareness, incorporating training for faculty, staff, and students, and implementing university-wide policy for gender inclusion are particularly relevant.

We conclude that one of the first steps towards gender-inclusive practices in HE spaces and, consequently, in society is to engage with how the term ‘gender’ is understood across different social and cultural contexts. Another step is to ensure that gender equitable practices are integral to the curriculum, pedagogy, and teaching-learning content, in short, throughout HE experiences, not just confined to a course or, program or lecture on gender studies. The stated challenges to a more holistic engagement with gender issues are social and cultural biases and intersectionality of other identities that constantly interact with gender (e.g., racialized grouping, class, caste, LGBTQ+). Addressing these challenges through pedagogic intervention and more representative teaching material allows a more holistic engagement with gender issues. A possible solution is to secure the engagement of higher education stakeholders that belong to various intersectional identity groups, thus ensuring that voices, experiences, needs, and ideas find adequate representation.

Our research indicated that teachers play a catalytic role in enabling conversations, pedagogy, assessment, and general interaction in higher education sites that are gender sensitive. Thus, recruiting faculty representing a diverse gender composition and providing continuous support enables teachers to co-create gender-equitable spaces and show empathetic ways to engage with others. Allowing for a diverse group of voices, from theories to thinkers to dissenters to poets and writers who also identify themselves as belonging to different gender categories, would provide an impetus to connect with gender issues more holistically. In this way, highlighting the voice of those “from the margins” in higher education contexts internationally can be encouraged and promoted by leadership to emphasize the importance of gender and diversity of pedagogical and societal relevance (CohenMiller, Durrani et al., 2022).

Higher education institutions serve as spaces that can encourage criticality of thought, allowing individuals from diverse backgrounds to understand, empathize, and contribute to creating an equitable, just society. We hope that by focusing on these crucial years of formal education in HE, we may encourage dialogues leading to a more sustainable and holistic appreciation of diverse representations of gender and equality, such as rethinking how leadership is enacted (see CohenMiller et al., forthcoming). Educational institutions can become agents of social change, promoting gender equality, diversity, and inclusion in higher education and society (Rodrigo & Clavero, 2022).

In this article, we have focused on two country contexts within a more extensive grant-funded study comparing gender-equitable futures in higher education, including the UK, Nigeria, Morocco, Kazakhstan, and India. Despite being geographically distant, Kazakhstan and India reflect similar gendered perspectives in the lives of those working and learning in higher education. The study findings highlighted how teachers and policies play essential roles in making HEIs equitable and socially just spaces that allow for and encourage multiple voices to emerge. Both countries have recently undergone educational reforms affecting lower, secondary, and higher education. These reforms have collectively sought to improve education, such as entry to universities and educational outcomes, specifically focusing on women and gender inclusivity (Khairullayeva et al., 2022; Menon, 2004). In India, recent educational reforms have focused on improving basic levels of educational access, including literacy, to hitherto marginalized and distressed groups, including women (Gohain, 2021; Kathuriya, 2018; Priya, 2021). Similarly, in Kazakhstan, educational reforms have affected the distribution of financial resources and the expansion of higher education institutions, including an emphasis on academic freedoms (Hartley et al., 2016).

The study showed that despite significant positive changes in recent years and support from the leadership in the Indian and Kazakhstan educational institutions, much needs to be done to include diverse gender groups, enabling them to occupy leadership positions. This is especially needed to cater to those at the intersections of caste, class, regional, and language disparities or margins. The absence of a gender-inclusive curriculum makes students ‘gender-blind’ professionals (Verge, 2021). Moreover, it means that the voices of women and other genders will not be heard and considered, thus denying them the opportunity to be adequately represented in positions of power.

An equal, diverse, and inclusive higher education institution that strives to meet international standards and compete with universities worldwide must be open to gender issues and include gender in the curriculum (Hinton-Smith et al., 2022). Incorporating gender and social justice into higher education will help raise student awareness, address inequities, and empower students (CohenMiller et al., forthcoming). Thus, the inclusion of gender as mainstreamed within the curriculum of HEIs, such as in Kazakhstan and India, can help transform universities into international centers of equality, inclusiveness, and diversity, affording a positive impact within and beyond academia on society.

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## Appendix

A graph of a bar chart

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