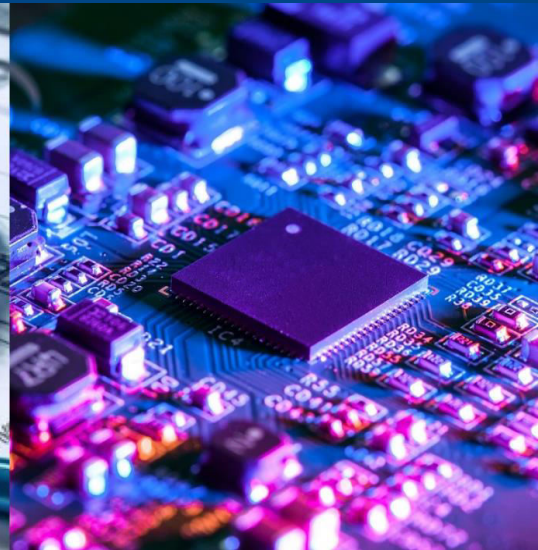
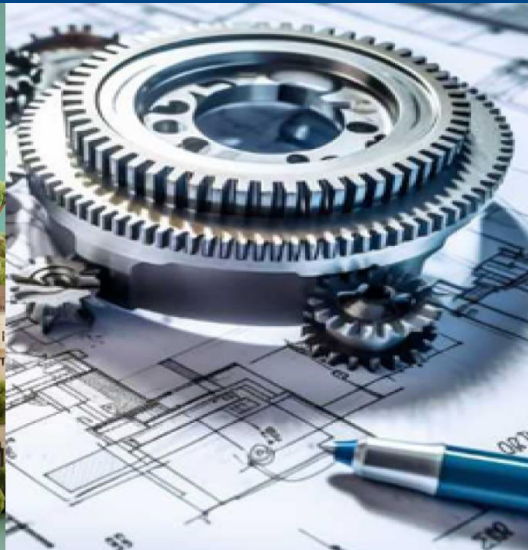
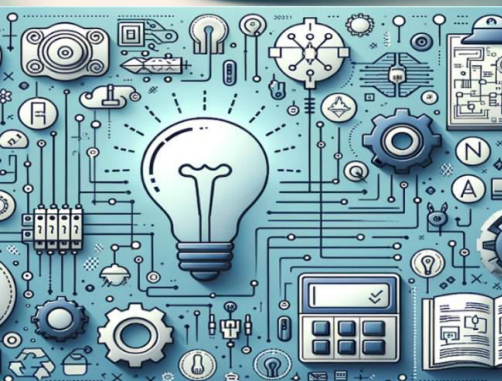




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Women's Education and Empowerment in Bihar: A Historical Review of Policies, Social Change, and Women's Agency from 1947 to 2025

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the relationship between women's education and empowerment in Bihar within the policy context. It uses a narrative review of selected scholarly studies, official policy documents, a published programme evaluation, and National Family Health Survey indicators. Kabeer's distinction between resources, agency, and achievements guides the analysis. The review examines changes in educational policy, barriers to secondary schooling, household decision-making, economic opportunity, and political participation. Bihar's bicycle programme provides evidence that reducing travel barriers can improve girls' secondary enrolment. Selected survey indicators show improvements in educational participation alongside continuing differences in extended schooling. However, gains in access do not establish equivalent gains in women's control over earnings, marriage decisions, or public authority. The analysis also identifies a territorial break following Bihar's reorganisation in 2000, which limits direct comparisons across the full period. The article argues that education supports empowerment when women can use learning to pursue choices they value, with support from safe mobility, viable work opportunities, collective organizations, and responsive institutions. It concludes with policy implications and priorities for further historical research. The study offers a selective interpretation of institutional change rather than a continuous statistical or archival history of Bihar.

KEYWORDS: women's education; empowerment; Bihar; historical change; gender inequality; educational policy

I. INTRODUCTION

Women's education in Bihar is a question of citizenship, social opportunity, and the distribution of power. A school place can provide an entry into literacy and further learning, but the practical value of that opportunity depends on whether a girl can attend regularly, complete successive stages, and use her education in adult life. An account of educational development must therefore consider the institutions that organize everyday choices. Families influence attendance and marriage; schools shape learning and aspiration; employment determines whether qualifications generate income; and local government affects the possibility of public participation. These relationships make empowerment a historical process rather than a direct consequence of enrolment.

The starting point of 1947 marks the creation of an independent national political order, while the Constitution of 1950 provides the central equality framework. Formal commitments to equal citizenship did not by themselves specify how every household would overcome the costs and social restrictions associated with girls' schooling. This article therefore asks how educational opportunities and the conditions for using them changed across the post-independence period. Its central argument is that access and agency must be analysed together. A rise in schooling can coexist with constraints on mobility, earnings, or the timing of marriage.

Existing research provides two complementary perspectives on this relationship. Kabeer (1999) explains why resources, the exercise of choice, and achieved outcomes require separate attention. Le and Nguyen (2021) examine education and women's empowerment across developing countries, while Muralidharan and Prakash (2017) investigate a specific educational intervention in Bihar. Read together, these studies support an analysis that connects educational opportunities with the conditions under which women can use them.



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II. RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

The research problem is the incomplete connection between the expansion of women's educational opportunities and the exercise of substantive choice. A history concerned only with literacy can overlook school quality and progression. A history concerned only with policy announcements can confuse intentions with implementation. An empowerment account concerned only with household decisions can overlook exclusion from paid work and public authority. These gaps require an approach that relates institutional change to several distinct outcomes.

The article has four objectives: to examine selected changes in the policy context of women's education after independence; to assess Bihar-specific evidence on educational access and barriers; to interpret the relationship between education and social, economic, and political agency; and to identify gaps in the evidence needed for a fuller history. The central question is how educational opportunities become usable choices for women. Related questions concern the barriers addressed by public interventions and the reasons educational gains may produce uneven outcomes. These questions guide a review of existing evidence rather than statistical hypothesis testing.

III. CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

Empowerment concerns a change in the capacity to make consequential choices where that capacity was previously restricted. Kabeer's (1999) distinction between resources, agency, and achievements helps keep educational provision separate from the exercise of choice and its results. Schooling is a resource; negotiating continued education is an expression of agency; completing an examination or securing desired employment is an achievement.

The article uses this distinction to interpret historical change. Educational resources include schools, teachers, learning materials, financial support, and transport. Agency includes a girl's influence over attendance, subject choice, further study, and marriage. Achievements include learning, completion, desired work, and effective public participation.

Social position affects the conversion of resources into achievements. Caste, household income, religion, disability, locality, and family responsibilities should be examined as potentially interacting conditions rather than as interchangeable explanations. A programme can be formally available to all eligible girls and still be harder to use for those living far from a functioning school. Conversely, a targeted intervention may address one constraint while leaving others unchanged. The historical task is to identify which relationship a source actually documents.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a narrative review of selected published and institutional sources. Its scope covers women's education and empowerment in Bihar within the historical policy context of 1947–2025. The source base comprises the studies and official documents cited in this article. Its purpose is to interpret relationships among educational provision, practical access, and women's agency.

Three types of evidence are considered. Scholarly studies provide a conceptual framework and findings on education and empowerment. Official policy and legal documents establish institutional commitments and changes in administrative context. The Bihar NFHS-5 fact sheet supplies selected descriptive indicators and corresponding NFHS-4 comparisons. The evaluation by Muralidharan and Prakash (2017) is considered separately because its comparison design supports a more specific assessment of the bicycle programme. Policy intentions, descriptive statistics, and programme estimates therefore serve different analytical purposes.

The synthesis compares policy commitments with the outcomes documented in the selected sources and distinguishes Bihar-specific findings from broader theoretical arguments. Published percentages are reported for their original survey populations; changes between the two NFHS rounds are calculated in percentage points. No individual-level survey data are reanalysed, and no new causal model or significance test is estimated. The year 2025 defines the end of the policy context considered here.

The geographical unit also changes within the study period. The Bihar Reorganisation Act, 2000, created Jharkhand from part of the former state (Government of India, 2000). Earlier statistics for undivided Bihar therefore require



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territorial adjustment before comparison with later figures. The review uses earlier developments as institutional context and restricts its numerical comparisons to the identified recent survey periods.

V. HISTORICAL POLICY CONTEXTS

Citizenship and educational opportunity after independence

The first analytical period concerns the relationship between formal equality and practical educational opportunity. The post-independence state established an institutional basis for expanded public education, but a constitutional commitment must be translated into staffing, infrastructure, expenditure, and locally usable services. For girls, the relevant question is whether a nominal entitlement becomes a feasible daily practice. Travel time, domestic labour, and parental expectations can influence that conversion even where no formal rule excludes girls.

The early decades provide the institutional background to the review rather than a fully reconstructed local history. Such a reconstruction would require school registers, district education reports, expenditure records, and women's accounts. Consequently, the discussion identifies the relationship between formal equality and educational provision without assigning uniform experiences to women across Bihar.

Education for equality and collective learning

The National Policy on Education 1986, modified in 1992, and the Programme of Action provide a policy setting in which women's equality and educational participation were connected explicitly (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 1992a, 1992b). Their significance for this article is conceptual: educational disadvantage was not reducible to a shortage of individual motivation. Institutional practices and social relations also required attention. Adult education and women's organisation could therefore become part of an educational strategy.

The Ministry's annual report for 2005–2006 identifies Mahila Samakhya as a programme connecting education and women's equality and includes Bihar among participating states (MHRD, 2006). Such a programme introduces a different historical mechanism from conventional school expansion. Women's collective discussion can help identify common barriers and make institutions more approachable. However, programme presence is evidence of an institutional initiative; it does not establish its coverage, intensity, or impact in every district.

State reorganisation and targeted institutional support

The creation of Jharkhand in 2000 marks a break in the geography of the study. It also requires historians to specify which Bihar they mean when discussing education and inequality. Post-2000 sources used here concern the reorganised state unless otherwise stated. This territorial clarification matters because changes in an aggregate can reflect a changed population as well as changes in schooling.

Two institutional developments are especially relevant to the later interpretation. Bihar's political reservation framework provided 50 per cent reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions under its 2006 legislation, as documented by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (n.d.). Separately, the bicycle programme addressed access to secondary school. These interventions operated in different domains. Reservation concerns entry into public office; mobility support concerns the feasibility of attendance. Their coexistence suggests why educational empowerment must be studied across institutions, but it does not demonstrate that one programme caused the outcomes of the other.

Inclusion in the policy context of 2020 to 2025

National Education Policy 2020 gives an institutional place to equitable education and proposes a Gender Inclusion Fund. Official explanations also identify measures such as accessible schools, girls' toilets, teacher sensitisation, and targeted support under Samagra Shiksha (Ministry of Education, 2020; Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2023). These provisions are relevant to Bihar as part of the national policy environment. Their existence should be distinguished from a verified assessment of implementation within the state.

For the closing years of the historical period, the central analytical issue is continuity between schooling and later opportunity. Digital learning may extend access, yet participation requires usable devices, connectivity, and time. Qualifications may increase aspiration, yet the availability and conditions of work shape what women can do with



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them. The present evidence supports identifying these policy questions; it does not provide a complete evaluation of Bihar's outcomes in 2025.

Table 1 Historical framework for interpreting women's education in Bihar

Period	Analytical focus	Evidence and caution
1947 to mid 1980s	Citizenship and access to public education	Institutional interpretation; no continuous local outcome series assembled
1986 to 1999	Equality policy and collective learning	NPE and Programme of Action; policy intent differs from implementation
2000 to 2019	Reorganised state and targeted access	Territorial break; reservation framework; bicycle programme evaluation
2020 to 2025	Inclusion and continuity of opportunity	NEP context; indicators retain their actual observation dates

Source: Author's interpretive framework based on the official policy sources cited in the text.

Table 1 presents an interpretive periodisation, not a claim that change occurred simultaneously across Bihar. The periods identify the changing questions asked of education: access to public provision, the meaning of equality, targeted removal of barriers, and the conversion of learning into adult opportunities. More detailed local histories may require different turning points.

VI. FINDINGS FROM SELECTED EVIDENCE

Mobility and secondary schooling

Muralidharan and Prakash (2017) evaluated Bihar's bicycle programme using a triple-difference design involving cohorts, gender, and a comparison state. Their published article reports a 32 per cent relative increase in age-appropriate secondary enrolment and a 40 per cent reduction in the corresponding gender gap. These are relative programme estimates, not percentage-point changes in statewide literacy. The distinction matters because a large relative change can begin from a low baseline.

The larger effects associated with distance from secondary schools are consistent with reduced travel barriers as an important mechanism (Muralidharan & Prakash, 2017). This finding connects a practical constraint to a measurable schooling outcome. It does not establish effects on earnings, marriage choices, or political authority. These outcomes require separate evidence, even where improved school access makes them more plausible.

Educational participation and attainment

Table 2 Selected Bihar indicators from NFHS 4 and NFHS 5

Indicator and population	2015–16 total %	2019–20 total %	Change pp
Ever attended school, females age 6 and above	56.9	61.1	+4.2
10 or more school years, women age 15–49	22.8	28.8	+6.0
Married before age 18, women age 20–24	42.5	40.8	–1.7

Source: International Institute for Population Sciences (2020), Bihar NFHS-5 state fact sheet, with NFHS-4 comparisons. Changes are calculated as NFHS-5 minus NFHS-4 in percentage points. Each row retains its own eligible population. The observations refer to 2015–16 and 2019–20.

School attendance among females aged six years and above increased from 56.9% to 61.1%, a gain of 4.2 percentage points. The proportion of women aged 15–49 with ten or more years of schooling rose from 22.8% to 28.8%, a gain of 6.0 percentage points. Among women aged 20–24, marriage before age 18 declined from 42.5% to 40.8%, a decrease of 1.7 percentage points (International Institute for Population Sciences [IIPS], 2020). These descriptive changes



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concern different populations and do not establish that the same women experienced all three transitions. Nor do the comparisons identify which programme caused a change.

The NFHS-5 fact sheet also reports that 48.0% of urban women aged 15–49 had completed ten or more years of schooling, compared with 25.2% of rural women, a difference of 22.8 percentage points (IIPS, 2020). This contrast shows why a statewide average is insufficient for assessing equality of opportunity. It supports further investigation of school availability, continuity of attendance, and household constraints. The aggregate figures alone cannot determine the contribution of each explanation.

VII. DISCUSSION OF EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT

Household agency and marriage decisions

Education may increase the ability to understand alternatives, communicate preferences, and approach public services. Comparative evidence in Le and Nguyen (2021) connects education with aspects of relational agency and suggests information and labour-market channels. For Bihar, these mechanisms provide questions for investigation. They do not justify importing a cross-country coefficient or assuming that educational attainment has identical effects in every household.

The timing of marriage is an important part of the educational pathway because marriage and domestic responsibilities may alter the feasibility of further study. The relationship can run in both directions: early marriage can interrupt education, while continued schooling may change expectations about marriage. A historical review should therefore avoid presenting their association as proof of one-way causation. Interviews and cohort-based records could help reconstruct the sequence of decisions and constraints.

Economic opportunity and control over earnings

Schooling may improve the skills needed for employment, financial transactions, and interaction with institutions. Its empowering value nevertheless depends on more than the possession of a qualification. Work must be accessible, conditions must be acceptable, and the woman must have some influence over the use of earnings. A household may value educated women while continuing to restrict their participation outside the home. This possibility helps explain why attainment and economic agency need separate measures.

The resources–agency–achievements framework clarifies this distinction (Kabeer, 1999). An educational qualification increases a woman's resources, but access to suitable work and influence over earnings concern agency and achieved outcomes. The evidence reviewed here does not quantify these connections for Bihar across the study period. A fuller assessment would need separate measures of paid and unpaid work, job quality, care responsibilities, and control over income.

Political participation and institutional voice

Reservation can open an institutional route into public life, while literacy and practical knowledge may support the ability to read records, understand procedures, and engage with officials. It would be mistaken, however, to conclude that a reserved seat necessarily produces independent authority. The relevant historical evidence would include attendance, speaking roles, agenda setting, access to records, and the handling of public resources. These distinguish representation from effective participation.

Bihar's framework is therefore treated as an enabling institutional condition rather than an outcome measure of empowerment. Education and political opportunity may reinforce one another, but their relationship should be studied through the experience of elected women, including women entering office with limited formal schooling. An inclusive account should recognise learning acquired through collective work and public responsibility as well as through schools.

Collective learning and access to institutions

Collective settings may reduce the isolation involved in challenging a restriction or requesting a public service. Discussion can identify shared problems and generate practical knowledge about entitlements, procedures, and



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available support. Education in this sense includes organised reflection and functional learning. The historical question is whether such learning expands women's room for action and whether institutions respond to their demands.

This perspective also prevents an individual-deficit interpretation of exclusion. A woman may understand a service perfectly and still encounter inaccessible offices or discriminatory treatment. Better information is valuable, but it cannot substitute for institutional accountability. The relationship between education and empowerment should therefore be examined from both sides: women's capacity to act and institutions' capacity and willingness to respond.

VIII. FINDINGS

The selected evidence indicates that educational opportunity depends on several connected institutions. Equality policies establish public commitments, schools provide learning opportunities, and targeted assistance can reduce barriers to attendance. Collective organisations and political institutions may provide additional opportunities to exercise voice. These relationships help explain why improved access can be an important achievement while leaving questions about adult autonomy unresolved (Kabeer, 1999; MHRD, 1992a, 1992b).

The strongest Bihar-specific programme finding considered here concerns secondary school access. The NFHS comparisons provide a broader descriptive picture of participation and attainment, including a substantial urban–rural difference. Together, these sources support the argument that access and continuity deserve separate attention. They do not establish a single effect of education on empowerment or a complete trajectory of change from independence to 2025. The contribution of the review is to connect the evidence to a clear distinction between educational resources and the ability to use them.

This distinction also affects how progress should be evaluated. Greater educational participation is valuable in itself, but empowerment requires attention to women's influence over consequential decisions. Historical research should therefore ask whether learning expands options for further study, desired employment, and public participation. It should include women whose educational achievements did not lead to the opportunities they sought, since these experiences can reveal barriers that enrolment statistics do not capture.

IX. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

A historically informed policy response should follow girls across transitions rather than count entry alone. Schools and education departments should monitor progression into secondary and higher education, identify the point at which participation breaks down, and connect financial assistance with usable transport, sanitation, teaching, and learning support. The bicycle evaluation indicates why a material barrier deserves direct attention; it does not establish that bicycles are the only appropriate solution in every locality.

Adult educational opportunities should also remain available to women who left school earlier. Functional literacy, financial understanding, digital skills, and knowledge of local institutions can be integrated with women's collectives and public-service outreach. Programme assessment should ask whether participants can complete practical tasks independently and influence decisions, rather than record attendance as sufficient evidence of empowerment.

Economic and political strategies should complement educational provision. Training needs links to viable opportunities, childcare, safe travel, and fair work conditions. Capacity support for elected women should include procedural learning and access to information without treating formal education as a condition of political legitimacy. Evaluation should include women's own priorities and examine differences within Bihar instead of assuming that a statewide average describes all experiences.

X. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This is a selective narrative review rather than an exhaustive systematic review or an archival history. The evidence is stronger for selected recent interventions and indicators than for the early post-independence decades. The reviewed sources differ in population, purpose, and research design, and their findings cannot be combined into a single empowerment index. The survey comparisons are descriptive, while causal interpretation of the bicycle programme



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remains bounded by the published evaluation. The territorial change of 2000 further limits comparisons across the full period. No direct assessment of all outcomes in 2025 is available within this source base.

Future work should combine a territorially consistent statistical series with school histories, administrative records, and ethically conducted oral histories. Cohort comparisons could examine whether improved attendance preceded changes in further study, marriage, work, or public participation. Such research should record age, social position, locality, disability, and care responsibilities. It should also investigate women whose educational gains did not produce desired opportunities, because those experiences reveal where institutional barriers persist.

XI. CONCLUSION

The relationship between women's education and empowerment in Bihar can be understood through changes in educational opportunity and the conditions for using it. The selected policy documents show increasing attention to equality, targeted access, collective learning, and inclusion. The bicycle evaluation demonstrates that a practical barrier to secondary schooling can be reduced. Survey comparisons indicate gains in educational participation and attainment while revealing a continuing urban–rural gap. These findings support a qualified account of progress rather than a claim of uniform empowerment across 1947–2025.

Education contributes to empowerment when women can use knowledge and qualifications to make choices they value. Improving attendance should therefore be accompanied by attention to learning, further study, safe mobility, viable employment, control over resources, and effective participation in public institutions. A fuller historical account will require consistent geographical comparisons and evidence of women's own decisions and experiences. The present review provides a framework for that work while keeping policy commitments distinct from demonstrated outcomes.

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