



Short Communication

Significance of feminist advocacy practices for SDG 4

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ABSTRACT

The pursuit of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities, emphasizes the empowerment of epistemically marginalized groups. Achieving this requires transformative approaches to dismantling coercive social imaginaries that shape normative frameworks for knowledge production. Recognizing the situatedness of the knower and fostering democratic negotiations of knowledge claims shift the focus from dominant institutional narratives to inclusive epistemic practices. Initiatives like *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* (BBBP) and Understanding of Lifelong Learning for All in Society (ULLAS) in India exemplify efforts to address systemic educational inequities. Feminist advocacy underscores the ecological interconnectedness of cohabitation, promoting social transformation. Advancing SDG 4 requires a critical examination of power dynamics in knowledge dissemination and the integration of innovative methods. Drawing on feminist frameworks and policy analysis, this paper argues that integrating feminist advocacy into educational methodologies advances inclusive, equitable, and transformative learning systems. It contributes a conceptual toolkit for assessing epistemic inclusion in the design of SDG-4 policies.

1. Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, an action plan encompassing 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), focuses on promoting prosperity, safeguarding the planet, and improving the well-being of people. Among these, SDG 4 specifically addresses education, aiming to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and foster lifelong learning opportunities for all. This goal has garnered significant attention in academic discourse. For instance, Boeren (2019) explores strategies to achieve SDG 4 using structure and agency theory, while Reimers (2024) evaluates progress stimulated by governmental, developmental, international, and academic efforts. Pandey (2018) contextualizes SDG 4 within India, analyzing trends in educational attainment at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, alongside challenges related to quality and accessibility. Similarly, Saini et al. (2023) assess various Indian government initiatives aimed at achieving quality education under SDG 4.

Recent scholarship affirms the necessity to achieve meaningful progress in SDG 4 moving beyond quantitative metrics. Reimers (2024) emphasizes substantive educational development which requires attention to deeper societal transformations than statistical indicators. Antoninis (2023) argues that success under SDG 4 should not be measured solely by achieved targets alone but by the acceleration of

purposeful policy-making. Communication-oriented perspective of Liguori et al. (2023) frames SDG 4 as a societal discourse that necessitates inclusive participation of diverse voices to achieve transformative educational results. Context-specific studies illustrate the challenges and opportunities of SDG 4. In Africa, Oketch (2024) emphasizes that many education systems cannot meet SDG 4 without addressing enabling conditions, such as qualified teachers, adequate financing, and effective governance. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the IDB's *State of Education in LAC 2024* provides a comprehensive review of learning assessments, equity, and system efficiency, pinpointing persistent gaps and the need for targeted interventions aligned with SDG 4 indicators (IDB, 2024). These studies advocate for a multifaceted approach to SDG 4, integrating policy, governance and social participation to ensure inclusive and transformative education.

Within the broader SDG 4 discourse, feminist scholarship highlights the epistemic dimensions of knowledge politics in shaping educational outcomes. Feminist perspectives explicitly indicate how inclusion is defined and enacted, emphasizing the importance of situating knowledge production within socio-cultural and gendered contexts. Esquivel (2019) offers a power-centered critique of the SDG process but overlooks the epistemic role of feminist advocacy in redefining educational inclusion. Odera and Mulusa (2020) highlight persistent gender disparities rooted in structural inertia, advocating for transformative interventions

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that address these inequities. Filho et al. (2023) link gender, awareness, and SDG implementation, accentuating the role of advocacy in catalyzing meaningful change. Despite these contributions, the literature often treats feminist advocacy primarily as a political or strategic activity, with limited attention to its knowledge-producing capacity. This study addresses this gap by re-conceptualizing feminist advocacy as an epistemic practice—one that critiques dominant social imaginaries, challenges exclusionary knowledge structures, and proposes pluralistic alternatives to prevailing educational paradigms. Integrating feminist epistemologies into SDG 4 implementation foregrounds interpretive, justice-oriented, and context-sensitive strategies for advancing inclusive and transformative education. The framework developed here is adaptable and can be applied across diverse national contexts. To this end, the study introduces and operationalizes three key conceptual constructs:

1. **Feminist advocacy as epistemic practice** – conceived as an intellectual practice that focuses and legitimizes subjugated knowledges within educational discourse, challenging the dominance of masculinist, Eurocentric, or technocratic epistemologies.
2. **Epistemic inclusion** – defined as the curricular and institutional integration of diverse, situated, and historically marginalized ways of knowing, fostering pluralism and critical engagement within educational systems.
3. **Educational policy of BBBP & ULLAS through Feminist Lens**—explored through the analysis of two Indian government initiatives: *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* (BBBP) and *Understanding Lifelong Learning for All in Society* (ULLAS), which are examined for their potential to support, resist, or negotiate feminist epistemological values.

2. Methodology and scope

This study uses *critical feminist policy analysis* to interrogate how education policies operate as instruments of epistemic justice. BBBP and ULLAS were chosen as flagship cases because they directly represent SDG 4 priorities—gender parity in access (4.5) and lifelong learning (4.7)—providing a representative lens on inclusion across the educational continuum. While grounded in the Indian policy context, the conceptual framework developed here has wider applicability, offering transferable insights for analysing education reforms globally. No empirical sampling or inferential statistics were conducted, as the analysis is primarily conceptual and policy-focused. The following objectives and research questions clarify how these constructs operate within the context of SDG 4:

2.1. Objective 1

To critically analyse how feminist advocacy, as an epistemic practice of resistance, reshapes educational methodologies in alignment with SDG 4 by translating constructs such as equity, epistemic justice, and inclusivity into specific educational transformations—namely, greater gender parity in participation, curricular integration of marginalized knowledges, and sustained opportunities for lifelong learning.

2.2. Research question 1

In what ways does feminist advocacy challenge dominant educational paradigms and enact alternative pedagogies that align with SDG 4—specifically by advancing gender parity in access, legitimizing

marginalized knowledges within curricula, and fostering supportive pedagogical practices for lifelong learning?

2.3. Objective 2

To evaluate how Indian educational initiatives such as BBBP and ULLAS contribute to epistemic inclusion by challenging coercive social imaginaries and fostering democratic, pluralistic learning environments. BBBP and ULLAS were selected as flagship initiatives that align with SDG 4—BBBP advancing gender parity in access (Target 4.5) and ULLAS promoting lifelong learning (Target 4.7). This will be assessed through measurable strategies, including promoting gender parity in enrolment and retention (BBBP), enabling community participation in curriculum and learning design (ULLAS), and expanding lifelong learning opportunities for marginalized groups. The impact of these strategies will be evidenced through enrolment and retention trends disaggregated by gender for BBBP, participation rates and curriculum co-design outcomes for ULLAS, and uptake levels alongside learner achievement indicators in lifelong learning programs for marginalized groups.

2.4. Research question 2

To what extent do BBBP and ULLAS reflect, reinforce, or resist feminist epistemological values in practice? Specifically, how do these initiatives:

1. Advance gender equity in access and retention (e.g., enrolment ratios, dropout reduction, participation rates);
2. Legitimize marginalized knowledges and voices through inclusive curriculum or community-based pedagogies; and
3. Foster sustainable lifelong learning opportunities by creating democratic, participatory educational spaces?

This study contributes to feminist epistemology and educational policy studies by proposing a theoretical framework that conceptualizes educational advocacy as both a political and epistemic practice. It addresses a critical gap in the literature on SDG 4, which has largely emphasized institutional, structural, and outcome-based approaches while neglecting the epistemic conditions that shape access to and quality of education. By framing feminist advocacy as a site of knowledge production and recognition, the study offers a conceptual toolkit for evaluating how educational policies can serve as instruments of epistemic justice. It underscores the need to acknowledge and integrate subjugated knowledges into educational frameworks, thereby expanding prevailing notions of inclusion and equity. Among the few works to bridge feminist epistemology with national policy analysis in an SDG context, it provides insights into how feminist perspectives can inform policy design and evaluation. It illuminates underexplored dimensions of Indian educational reforms, particularly in relation to BBBP and ULLAS, while the framework developed here can also inform analyses of global education policies beyond India. This analysis shows how national policy efforts can either reinforce or challenge dominant epistemic structures and contribute to the broader objectives of sustainable education. By positioning epistemic inclusion as a necessary condition for achieving SDG 4 targets, the study fills a key policy gap and highlights why equity in knowledge recognition is as critical as equity in access or outcomes.

3. Feminist advocacy as epistemic practice in advancing educational equity

Advocacy amplifies the voices of marginalized individuals, particularly those constrained within dominant narratives that dictate what constitutes knowledge and who is entitled to know. It equips individuals with epistemic positions, facilitating their participation in knowledge-making processes. By critically rethinking knowledge claims, advocacy challenges the existing normative epistemological framework, making subversion a liberatory practice. Advocacy encompasses a range of activities, including public opinion polling, referenda, and people-centered approaches aimed at influencing socio-political structures to incorporate the claims of the marginalized. Evans (2005) conceptualizes advocacy as a strategy encompassing research, analysis, lobbying, alliance-building, and communication.¹ Code further defines advocacy as a set of liberatory practices, including defending, supporting, recommending, or representing marginalized individuals or groups. These practices are instrumental in uncovering suppressed truths and creating spaces for subjugated knowledges, thereby fostering emancipatory outcomes (Code, 2006, p. 176). Advocacy's defence of local, indigenous, and marginalized epistemologies aligns closely with the issue of epistemic exclusion, a critical concern addressed by SDG 4.

In the context of educational methodologies, teacher advocacy emerges as a significant theme. Picower (2012) identifies three core commitments for teachers as advocacy practitioners: (a) recognizing the dual potential of education to liberate or oppress students, (b) fostering classrooms as caring and inclusive learning spaces, and (c) employing place- and culture-based instructional approaches. Pantić (2017) emphasizes that advocacy-oriented teachers prioritize students' well-being, ensure equitable learning opportunities, foster awareness of social injustices within and beyond the school, and cultivate critical consciousness among students. However, effective advocacy also requires leadership skills and sustained support from colleagues and mentors within educational networks (Collay, 2010). Extending this analysis beyond India, comparative insights highlight the global relevance of feminist advocacy. In Africa, Oketch (2024) argues that education systems cannot achieve SDG 4 without addressing enabling conditions such as teacher quality, adequate financing, and effective governance. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the Inter-American Development Bank's *State of Education in LAC 2024* reviews learning outcomes, equity, and system efficiency, affirming persistent disparities and the need for targeted interventions aligned with SDG 4 indicators (IDB, 2024). Here, feminist advocacy provides a unifying lens: by centering equity, positionality, and the transformation of power relations, it addresses structural deficiencies such as teacher shortages and financing gaps as well as reimagines pedagogy and policy as sites of social justice. These regional perspectives reinforce the urgency of embedding advocacy-oriented, justice-focused approaches within educational policy and practice worldwide.

Advocacy within education serves as a critical and creative response to the rigid normative frameworks that disadvantage certain learners. For instance, Functional Literacy Classes (FLC), implemented through a joint program by UNESCO, UNFPA, and the United Nations, exemplify advocacy in action. FLC programs address collective and individual needs by combining vocational training and the acquisition of practical knowledge with basic literacy and numeracy skills. A testimonial from Komal, a participant from Nepal (UNESCO, 2020), illustrates the transformative impact of such initiatives. Having dropped out of school due to persistent teacher absenteeism, Komal enrolled in FLC, where she

enhanced her literacy, numeracy, health knowledge, and understanding of how to protect herself from gender-based violence and human trafficking. Gaining self-confidence through the program, she convinced her parents to reenroll her in school and eventually became an advocate for girls' education. The equitable access to relevant knowledge envisioned in SDG 4 necessitates advocacy practices tailored to empower disadvantaged groups. Effective advocacy, however, requires context-specific strategies that address the unique challenges faced by marginalized individuals. By fostering inclusivity and promoting transformative educational practices, advocacy becomes a cornerstone for achieving the SDG 4 target of equitable and quality education for all.

Feminist advocacy in knowledge production critically engages with the situatedness of the knower, intersecting axes such as gender, race, class, and caste, and critiques the prevailing social imaginaries. These principles can be effectively applied to educational methodologies. Jaggur (2000) posits that a comprehensive understanding of social location is essential for recognizing and addressing unjust conditions. Alcoff (1991) and Code (1995) highlight the epistemic significance of a speaker's location, arguing that it influences the credibility of their claims and can either authorize or disauthorize their speech. Similarly, Haraway (1988) advocates for "vision from below," asserting that situated knowledges provide more adequate, objective, and transformative accounts of knowledge (Haraway, 1988, p. 589).

Lorraine Code extends the discourse by situating knowledge within the concept of social imaginaries—those deeply embedded frameworks of "images, meanings, metaphors, and interlocking explanation-expectations" that authorize or discredit practices and establish epistemological norms (Code, 2006, p. 55). Charles Taylor (2004) similarly defines social imaginaries as the enabling frameworks for collective life, constituted not by formal social theory but by shared narratives, legends, and cultural understandings of social existence. Such imaginaries, shaped by normative assumptions and symbolic representations, influence how communities envision roles, responsibilities, and expectations. Code critiques dominant imaginaries as "benign conceptions of community" that obscure dissent and foreclose spaces of debate (Code, 2006, vii). For her, these imaginaries are socially constructed routes to knowledge, structured by epistemic habits and dispositions that regulate how communities of knowers operate. To counter these hegemonic imaginaries, Code (2006, p. 229) introduces the notion of "responsible imaginings," which enable critical challenges to exclusionary frameworks and encourage inclusive epistemic practices. By foregrounding marginalized perspectives, such reimagining destabilizes power-laden narratives, generates counter-possibilities, and expands democratic negotiation of knowledge claims. Feminist advocacy thus acquires a transformative role: interrogating entrenched epistemic habits to reconstruct imaginaries that foster equity within education and beyond (Anthony, 2024).

Within this framework, Code (2006) distinguishes between *instituted* and *instituting* social imaginaries.² Instituted imaginaries reflect spectator epistemologies of mastery, allied with Enlightenment rationality and capitalist consumerism. These imaginaries privilege a Western, affluent orientation toward dominating both human and non-human worlds. Knowledge here emerges from a detached knower—a shadow-like figure stripped of affect, embodiment, and historical context—whose role is reduced to passive observation. Such imaginaries perpetuate appropriationist logics that reinforce existing hierarchies of power. Conversely, instituting imaginaries embody "a cluster of subversive and productive practices, metaphors, and images" that resist

¹ An advocacy strategy's effectiveness depends on four key questions: What is its primary focus? Who is the target audience, and what outcomes are sought? What impact is the strategy intended to achieve? Which policy changes or decision-making structures are targeted? (Evans, 2005). These questions provide a framework for developing focused and impactful advocacy initiatives.

² Code, drawing on Castoriadis' "instituted social imaginary," equated with "common sense," emphasizes the need for imagination to transform it. She advocates reimagining knowledge frameworks, addressing diverse epistemic positions and responsibilities. The imaginer thus disrupts and destabilizes established imaginaries, revealing the necessity and difficulty of thinking beyond entrenched boundaries (p. 61).

totalizing narratives (Code, 2006, p. 33). They demand participatory, embodied, and responsive epistemic practices, wherein knowers accept responsibility for their active engagement in knowledge production. Instituting imaginaries thus operate as mediums of radical critique, exposing the inequities and inadequacies of instituted frameworks (Anthony, 2025, p. 62). For instance, challenges to entrenched imaginaries that position men as breadwinners and women as homemakers underpin both the expansion of girls' access to education and the formation of gender-equity policies. By cultivating such instituting practices, Code (2008) situates feminist epistemology as a project of reconfiguring imaginaries toward just and inclusive knowledge systems.

This distinction has direct implications for pedagogy and policy. Instituted imaginaries inform traditional curricula that privilege abstract, universalist knowledge over local and embodied ways of knowing, thereby sustaining hierarchies of gender, caste, and class. By contrast, instituting imaginaries enable pedagogies that recognize learners as situated knowers, fostering dialogical engagement, plural epistemologies, and equitable teacher–student relations. In India, this shift is crucial for initiatives like BBBP and ULLAS. For BBBP, instituting imaginaries would reorient policy beyond symbolic appeals to familial duty, embedding gender-sensitive curricula that cultivate girls' civic subjectivity and rights-based agency. For ULLAS, instituting practices would mean valuing community knowledges, ensuring women's safe participation, and embedding gender-transformative content within lifelong learning programs. Feminist epistemology thus provides both a critique of exclusionary imaginaries and a practical toolkit for reconfiguring education and policy toward equity and justice.

4. BBBP through feminist lens

The BBBP initiative by the Government of India exemplifies an effort to critique and transform existing social imaginaries regarding the education and status of girls. The program aims to address the declining Child Sex Ratio (CSR) and promote women's empowerment throughout different stages of life. By challenging traditional social norms that often perceive girls as societal burdens, the initiative seeks to enhance their rights and opportunities.³ To achieve its goals, BBBP has employed a range of advocacy strategies nationwide. In Pithoragarh district, in the Indian State of Uttarakhand for example, the program has implemented several measures aimed at protecting and promoting the education of the girl child. Key steps include the formation of District and Block Task Forces, which have developed action plans to address concerns related to CSR. Additionally, large-scale awareness campaigns have amplified the program's reach, utilizing rallies that involve schools, Army institutions, and government departments. Culturally sensitive mediums, such as street plays performed in village and market areas, depict the harsh realities of sex-selective practices and the challenges faced by girls. These performances effectively engage diverse audiences by presenting these issues in relatable narratives. Further advocacy efforts include a Signature Campaign, Pledge, and Oath Ceremony, which engaged over 700 postgraduate students and Army personnel, emphasizing the program's message.

The impact of the BBBP initiative is evident in its measurable outcomes. For instance, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for girls in secondary schools improved significantly, rising from 77.45 % in 2014–15 to a provisional 81.32 % in 2018–19, as per UDISE data. By critiquing and reshaping deep-rooted social imaginaries that perpetuate gender

³ Chidambaram (2022) critiques the BBBP scheme, noting that 80 % of its funds in 2021 were spent on advertisements. She argues that the campaign prioritizes projecting the government as a protector of "vulnerable" girls, raising concerns about its focus on populist image-building over genuine child welfare. Despite India's ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), BBBP emphasizes symbolic gestures over substantive, rights-based, and participatory programs for children.

inequities, the BBBP initiative demonstrates how instituting imaginaries can create transformative and inclusive educational practices, thereby advancing the objectives of SDG 4.⁴

Advocacy practices that critique social imaginaries often adopt diverse pedagogical strategies to engage knowledge practices in productive tension. Critical and multicultural pedagogies, especially those centered on dialogic engagement with local and institutional structures of oppression, empower students to critically examine their socio-historical contexts and envision pathways for transformative change. The dialectical examination of the oppressor and oppressed, which seeks to highlight socio-cultural experiences of prejudice, inequality, stereotypes, discrimination, and social identities, may create tense classroom environments. However, this tension can be addressed through an ecological perspective that fosters constructive engagement.

Ecological thinking, as opposed to hegemonic dichotomous frameworks that privilege specific types of knowledge or groups, embraces multifaceted and conflicting perspectives. It is a way of inhabiting the social environment, recognizing social location as a "habitat and medium of social interaction and encounter" (Code, 2006, p. 27). This "habitat" reflects people's endeavors to foster the collective well-being of their communities. Code describes "inhabiting" as an active and thoughtful practice that is socially, affectively, and responsibly engaged. Ecological thinking, therefore, fosters what Code calls an ecological imaginary, which involves "imagining, crafting, articulating, and endeavouring to enact principles of ideal cohabitation" (Code, 2006, p. 24). Adapting ecological thinking to educational practices involves developing critical pedagogies that amplify the voices of the marginalized while promoting co-habitability. Though such practices may generate conflict and instability, these dynamics are constructive, enabling individuals and communities to imagine ways of coexisting equitably. Feminist critiques of social imaginaries are particularly valuable in advancing ideals of global citizenship, peace, diversity, and lifelong learning.

In India, traditional norms favouring sons and embedded patriarchal power structures have long hindered the well-being and educational opportunities of young girls, perpetuating societal inequalities and economic disadvantages. These systemic challenges also disrupt societal harmony, obstructing the development of inclusive and equitable communities. The BBBP initiative has emerged as a significant intervention in challenging patriarchal norms such as son preference and regressive power dynamics, fostering a vision of inclusive and empowered coexistence.⁵ The impact of the BBBP initiative is reflected in measurable improvements in the Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB).

This chart (Fig. 1) plots the number of girls per 1000 boys under age six in Indian states for two periods, 2014–16 (dark line) and 2017–19 (light line). Across almost every state there's a modest uptick in the later period: for example, Bihar climbs from about 905 to 945, Himachal Pradesh from 915 to 950, and Kerala from roughly 940 to 960. A handful of states—Assam and Odisha—dip slightly, but most shifts are positive. Nevertheless, even the best-performing states (Kerala, Chhattisgarh and West Bengal, all nearing or above 950 in 2017–19) still fall short of

⁴ According to the government press note marking the 10th anniversary of the BBBP scheme, the Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB) improved from 918 in 2014–15 to 930 in 2023–24, indicating a positive shift in gender bias. Girls' enrolment in secondary education rose from 75.5 % to 78 %, reflecting modest gains in access and retention. The scheme has also promoted women's empowerment through focused efforts in skill training, economic initiatives, and community engagement, contributing to a more gender-inclusive development agenda. (Chandra, 2025).

⁵ Jain, Jain, Periwal, Agarwal, and Praveen (2024) acknowledges BBBP as vital for promoting girls' education and welfare but emphasizes the need for targeted educational reforms and policy integration. She argues that awareness campaigns, while challenging stereotypes, are insufficient; sustainable impact requires pairing awareness with effective and actionable implementation strategies.

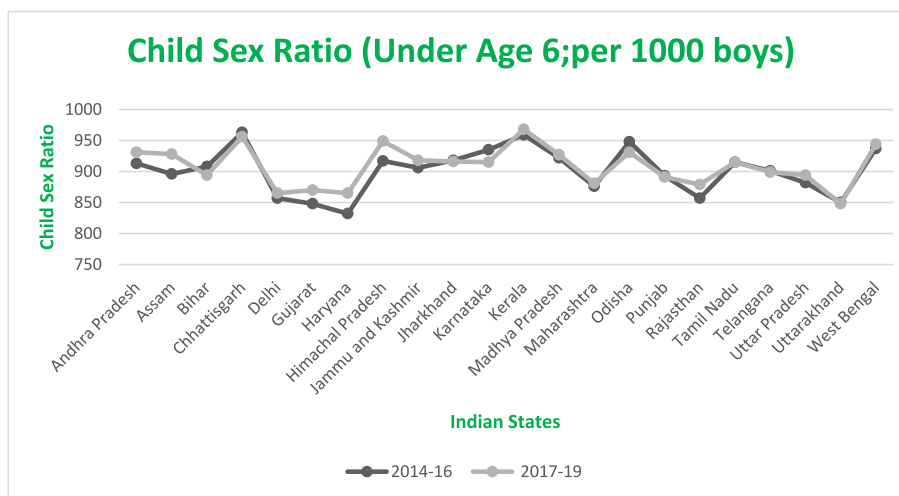


Fig. 1. Child sex ratio trends in major Indian states: Balanced gains and enduring deficits (source: Ministry of health and family welfare, government of India).

parity, while the lowest (Gujarat, Delhi, Haryana and Uttarakhand, hovering around 850–880) reveal persistent gender imbalances. Overall, the data point to small but widespread improvements in the child sex ratio over time.

The chart (Fig. 2) shows how the number of girls per 1000 boys under age 6 has changed across twelve districts between 2015, 2018, and 2022. In 2015 Ambala stood out with an unusually high ratio (around 1200), while most other districts clustered between 850 and 900. By 2018 the ratios had evened out somewhat—hovering mostly between 920 and 980 with a few peaks (Gurgaon) and dips (Bhiwani). In 2022 the overall trend slips lower, with many districts falling below 900 (Narnaul bottoms out near 820) and only a modest recovery toward the end, signalling a slight but widespread decline in the child sex ratio over time.

The BBBP initiative has engaged communities through innovative and celebratory practices that honour the girl child, effectively challenging ingrained biases and patriarchal norms. By fostering grassroots advocacy and social awareness, the program has become a powerful vehicle for promoting gender equity and driving transformative social change across India.

5. Feminist practices in lifelong learning: Pathways to transformative education

Lifelong learning is a cornerstone of human development, emphasized in SDG 4, which underscores its significance for fostering inclusive and equitable education. While often framed through foundational skills like literacy and numeracy, lifelong learning also encompasses broader goals such as fostering global citizenship and enabling participation in decision-making processes for a sustainable future (Webb et al., 2019). From a feminist perspective, expanding the epistemic terrain to include concepts like ecological imaginaries, diversity, and cohabitability enhances the articulation of sustainable lifelong learning. Participation models for lifelong learning, though widely discussed, remain complex and challenging. As Boeren (2016) emphasizes that participation in lifelong learning is profoundly unequal, differing not only among individuals but also across countries. Addressing these inequalities requires robust policy interventions alongside advocacy efforts to critique gender, social, and economic disparities. Such efforts are fundamental to fostering inclusive educational opportunities that promote collective well-being and equitable participation.

Critical consciousness plays a pivotal role in enfranchising the oppressed and marginalized, creating a dynamic site for lifelong learning. Allman (2000) argues that authentic social transformation necessitates adopting critical educational praxis at all levels to nurture

this consciousness. Raising awareness about one's socio-historical location and reflecting on structural hegemonies open public spaces for emancipatory and empowering participation. These shared spaces, marked by their inherent tensions, become vibrant sites for learning through interaction with others. Such spaces are indispensable for achieving gender equality, fostering economic growth, improving health and well-being, and cultivating active citizenship aligned with democratic values.

Feminist ecological thinking offers a revised engagement with knowledge, emphasizing cohabitability and the importance of learning from and with others to create a caring habitat. Lifelong learning, framed within this ecological vision, becomes an ongoing practice rather than a finite goal. Code (2006) argues that dominant institutional imaginaries often constrain our ability to imagine and craft the kind of society we aspire to live in. Thus, lifelong learning rooted in ecological thinking requires imagining and fostering a habitat of cultural diversity and shared well-being. Kamler (2017) supports this vision, calling for the design of new spaces for lifelong learning that nurture growth and change, where learners are also recognized as producers of knowledge. Feminist advocacy, through critical, creative, and ecological thinking, promotes participation in building such spaces, advancing the ideals of lifelong learning and cohabitation.

6. ULLAS and lifelong learning: Prospects and limits

In India, the Government's ULLAS scheme represents a significant initiative aligned with the lifelong learning vision outlined in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. ULLAS adopts a holistic approach to 21st-century education, addressing contemporary needs beyond foundational literacy and numeracy. The scheme emphasizes Critical Life Skills, including financial literacy, digital literacy, commercial skills, healthcare awareness, childcare, education, and family welfare, reflecting the interconnectedness of individual well-being and societal progress.⁶ The inclusion of vocational skills development underscores the scheme's practical orientation, aiming to generate local employment opportunities while foundational education across preparatory, middle,

⁶ Mandal (2019) observes that Adult Education (AE) in India, originally grounded in humanistic ideals aimed at social transformation, has increasingly shifted under the influence of Lifelong Learning (LLL). Today, LLL often aligns with neoliberal agendas, prioritizing market-driven objectives within education. This shift reveals a deeper divergence: while AE's mission remains rooted in transformative social change, LLL's neoliberal orientation marks a significant departure, despite their apparent similarities.

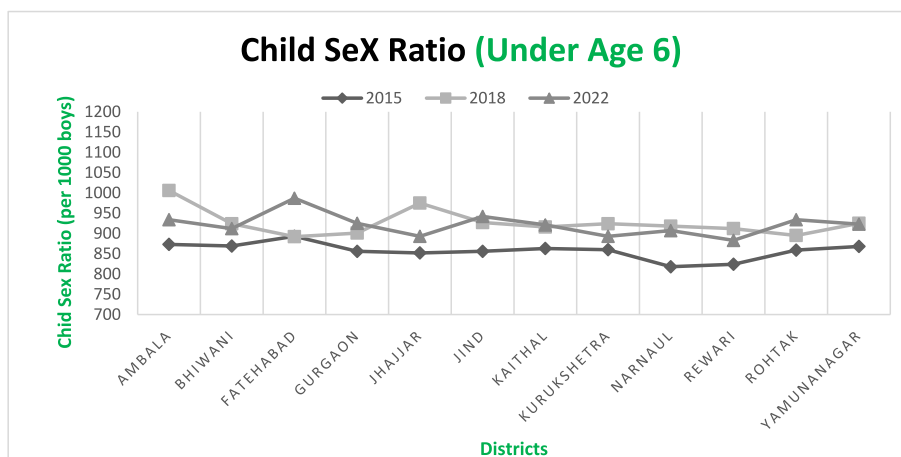


Fig. 2. Child Sex Ratio: Persistent Gender Inequities Amid Policy Campaigns Despite campaign saturation, the child sex ratio slightly declined by 2022, highlighting the tension between entrenched (instituted) and transformative (instituting) social imaginaries. (Source: Ministry of Health and family Welfare, Government of India).

and secondary levels ensures a continuous learning pathway.

Moreover, ULLAS highlights Continuing Education, offering adult education courses in diverse fields such as arts, sciences, technology, culture, sports, and recreation. This breadth addresses the varied interests and needs of local learners, while the provision of advanced materials on critical life skills ensures an adaptable and responsive educational framework. However, while ULLAS effectively addresses foundational and practical education needs, it falls short in incorporating elements that align with the feminist ideal of cohabitability. Such integration could enrich the scheme, fostering inclusivity and ecological thinking in lifelong learning practices. By addressing these gaps, ULLAS could position itself as a forward-thinking initiative that supports equity and inclusivity in lifelong learning, promoting a sustainable and harmonious society.

ULLAS has demonstrated substantial progress in promoting foundational literacy across India (Fig. 3). To date, the initiative has reached over 7.7 million beneficiaries who have appeared for the Foundational Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Test (FLNAT). Furthermore, the ULLAS mobile application has facilitated engagement with more than 15 million learners and mobilized approximately 3.7 million volunteer educators, reflecting the program’s expansive reach and its growing institutional and community-based impact on adult education.

The Indian Government’s BBBP and ULLAS schemes highlight the critical role of advocacy as an epistemic practice, one that re-engages with the complexities of real-world challenges. These programs, while designed to address distinct socio-cultural issues, reveal how advocacy functions both as a mechanism for change and as a means of validating knowledge claims. Operating within hierarchical social structures, advocacy acquires epistemological significance by contesting entrenched systems of power and privilege. It can act as a liberatory practice, widening access to knowledge and representation for marginalized groups and enabling the emergence of new, transformative perspectives (Code, 2010).

As a practice, advocacy entails representing, supporting, and actively engaging with communities in projects of inquiry or intervention. Such engagement unsettles embedded social imaginaries that perpetuate inequity and instead fosters more inclusive forms of cohabitability. In this sense, advocacy creates networks of responsible epistemic practice that challenge dominant modes of knowledge production and dissemination. Yet advocacy is never static: it requires ongoing vigilance, negotiation, and revision. Its fallibilist orientation keeps it open to corroboration and contestation, while grounded in a commitment to inclusive and responsible knowledge-seeking. In doing so, advocacy exposes truths obscured by dominant narratives and seeks to dismantle constructed ignorance. At the same time, its paradoxical nature means that it may inadvertently reinforce ignorance when communities resist new epistemic possibilities or seek to protect uncertainty.

By interrogating the socio-political dynamics that produce and sustain ignorance, this study advances feminist epistemology and SDG-4 debates beyond existing critiques. Esquivel (2019) draws attention to power asymmetries within the SDG process but does not consider the epistemic role of feminist advocacy in redefining educational inclusion. Odera and Mulusa (2020) emphasize structural inertia behind persistent gender disparities but stop short of showing how advocacy might reconfigure the epistemic norms that underpin them. Filho et al. (2023) link gender, awareness, and SDG implementation, stressing advocacy’s catalytic role, yet without framing it as an epistemic practice that contests ignorance. This study extends these insights by conceptualizing advocacy not merely as a political tool but as a mode of responsible knowledge-making. Through the cases of BBBP and ULLAS, it illustrates how feminist advocacy can disrupt dominant imaginaries, reshape epistemic norms, and open pathways toward more inclusive and equitable educational futures.

Advocacy constitutes a significant component of contemporary efforts to reconfigure equitable knowledge practices within hierarchical societies, and in India particularly through schemes such as BBBP and

Dates	States/UTs Participated	Learners Appeared (Number)	Learners Certified (Number)	Pass Percentage
19-03-2023	11	22,37,510	20,42,174	91.27%
24-09-2023	13	17,57,053	15,75,129	89.64%
17-03-2024	23	33,29,704	29,52,385	88.6%

Fig. 3. ULLAS scheme in India
Source: Ministry of education, government of India.

ULLAS. However, when measured against the benchmarks of SDG 4 (Quality Education), their reach and impact reveal notable disparities. Urban girls, especially from middle- and upper-class households, are relatively advantaged due to stronger infrastructure, digital access, and supportive familial networks. These conditions contribute partially to the fulfilment of Target 4.1 (ensuring all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education). However, rural girls remain constrained by systemic disadvantages, including distant schools, inadequate sanitation, and regressive social norms that prioritize marriage over education (Government of India, 2021). Such conditions undermine Target 4.a (safe, inclusive, and gender-sensitive learning environments) and Target 4.5 (eliminating gender disparities in education). The structural and cultural barriers such as unsafe travel distances, insufficient menstrual hygiene management, and high absenteeism hinder progress towards Target 4.3 (equal access to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education) and Target 4.7 (acquisition of knowledge and skills for gender equality and sustainable development) (ASER Centre, 2023). These limitations divulge how accessibility is not a question of infrastructure but deeply embedded within gendered and socio-economic inequalities.

Against this backdrop, feminist perspectives reposition education not as a finite project of literacy or functional skill acquisition but as a lifelong process of empowerment and critical consciousness. This orientation reverberates with Target 4.4 (skills for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship) and Target 4.7, where education is regarded as capable of enabling women to renegotiate social roles, interrogate entrenched hierarchies of caste and creed, and resist oppressive structures. In this view, empowerment is not reducible to vocational competence. It involves the cultivation of autonomy, reflective agency, and the capacity to challenge systemic injustice. Yet, the operational practices of existing schemes often dilute such transformative potential. The BBBP campaign’s reliance on the category “*beti*” (daughter) symbolically situates girls within familial identities, valuing them primarily in their roles as daughters, wives, or mothers. This orientation falls short of Target 4.7’s mandate to promote gender equality and human rights, as it sidelines the construction of women as autonomous citizens. Similarly, ULLAS, while expanding adult literacy and vocational access, does not adequately address systemic impediments such as gender-based

violence, discriminatory curricular content, or inequitable access to employment opportunities—all of which directly compromise Target 4.5 (eliminating gender disparities) and Target 4.b (expanding scholarships and opportunities for vulnerable groups). Unless these initiatives are critically reoriented, they risk re-inscribing patriarchal norms under the rubric of empowerment. A meaningful alignment with SDG 4 thus demands the integration of feminist critiques into programmatic design: confronting structural inequities, embedding gender-transformative pedagogy, and reframing women’s education as the foundation of active citizenship and sustainable social justice (See Fig. 4).

7. Conclusion

Epistemic inclusion is a prerequisite for achieving SDG 4, requiring education policies to move beyond questions of access toward reconfiguring the epistemic norms that structure knowledge production. This conceptual and interpretive study, drawing on secondary sources, offers a theoretical account of how feminist epistemologies can inform educational policy in relation to SDG 4. It argues that structural reforms alone are insufficient; instead, transformative rethinking of knowledge production is needed to confront entrenched socio-historical inequalities. By situating knowers within embodied contexts, feminist frameworks advance justice-oriented, interdisciplinary approaches that reframe education as resistance. Central here is epistemic responsibility, which challenges dominant assumptions, acknowledges positionality, and centers marginalized voices. When lifelong learning is shaped by these principles, it transcends literacy to foster critical consciousness, civic agency, and collective capacity to contest systemic oppression. In India, feminist epistemic practices face resistance from entrenched patriarchy and rigid educational hierarchies, reflected in persistent gender disparities. Child sex ratios show only modest gains—Bihar (905 → 945) and Himachal Pradesh (915 → 950)—while states like Gujarat, Delhi, and Haryana remain stagnant (850–880), with some districts regressing (Narnaul ~820 in 2022). Yet, initiatives like ULLAS, with 7.7M tested, 15M learners on its app, and 3.7M volunteers, create openings for feminist advocacy by embedding community-based, lifelong education that can focus marginalized knowledges. Achieving SDG 4 demands wider access and a transformation of epistemic norms. For BBBP, this

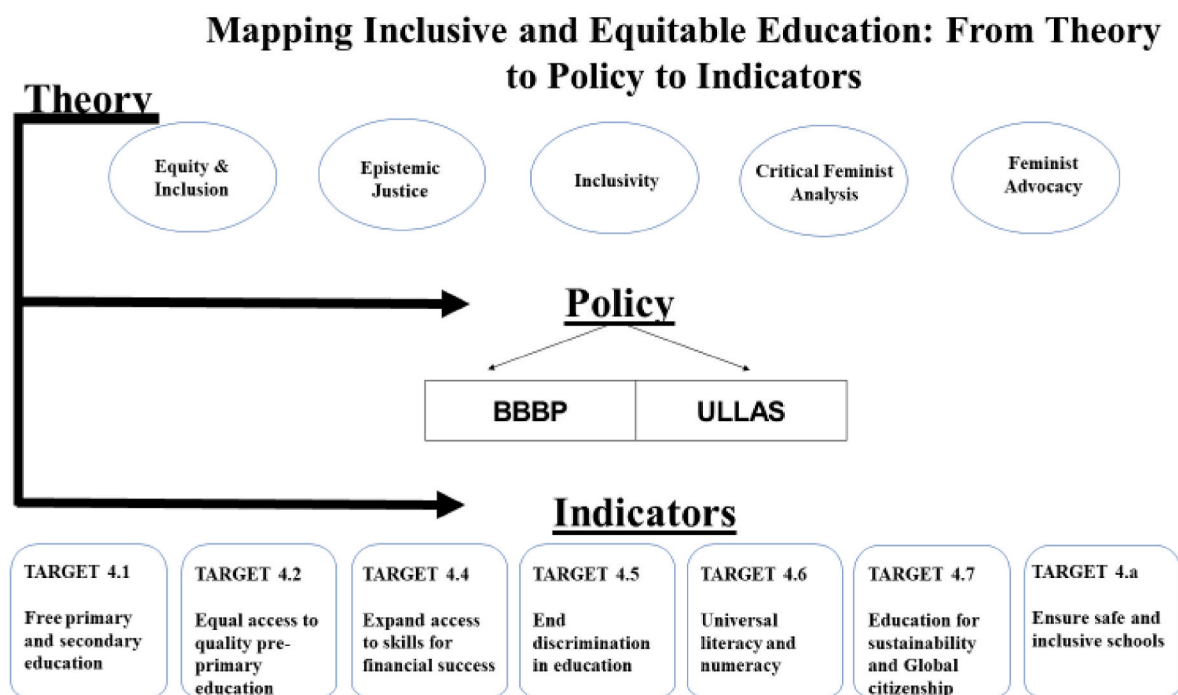


Fig. 4. Visual framework for inclusive and equitable education.

means redesigning interventions to move beyond familial symbolism toward cultivating rights-based civic subjectivity for girls. For ULLAS, the implication is embedding gender-transformative content and safeguards to ensure safe, equitable participation. The analysis here is situated within the Indian policy context, and while its insights have broader implications for assessing epistemic inclusion in other national settings, two caveats remain. First, there is a risk of overgeneralizing from a single-country case to the global SDG agenda, where institutional and cultural contexts differ significantly. Second, reliance on secondary sources may not fully capture the lived experiences and voices of women and marginalized communities most affected by epistemic exclusion. Future research should therefore adopt participatory, longitudinal, and comparative approaches to accentuate these perspectives and assess how justice-oriented interventions enhance both foundational skills and critical consciousness. Linking such evidence with theory can operationalize feminist epistemologies, positioning education as a site of equity and transformative change.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Baiju Anthony: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Anupam Yadav:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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