

# Community Participation and Learning Outcomes among School Students: Policy Perspectives on Gender-Just Educational Innovation

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## ABSTRACT

Community participation has re-emerged as a key strategy for addressing learning deficits and educational inequities, particularly in rural and marginalised contexts. However, policy and research often treat community engagement as a neutral or technical input, with limited attention to its gendered dimensions. This paper examines a community-led educational intervention implemented in rural Tamil Nadu through a qualitative case study informed by feminist policy analysis. Drawing on programme documentation, gender-disaggregated participation records, and case narratives, the study analyses how learning spaces were relocated from schools to homes and community sites, and how women—especially mothers—emerged as central pedagogic actors. The findings show that learning improvements were closely linked to gendered processes of care, proximity, and emotional support, with particularly positive effects for girls facing constraints related to domestic labour, restricted mobility, and digital exclusion. At the same time, the intervention exposes tensions arising from the reliance on women's unpaid educational labour. The paper argues that community participation can contribute to gender-just learning outcomes only when supported by policy frameworks that recognise, resource, and integrate community pedagogic labour within the public education system, rather than assuming it as voluntary care work.

**Keywords:** Community participation; feminist education policy; gender justice; learning outcomes; rural education; parental engagement

## INTRODUCTION

Across rural India, persistent learning deficits among school-going children are closely intertwined with socio-economic inequalities, gender norms, and fragile school–community linkages. While recent policy frameworks such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasise community participation and parental engagement, implementation often remains school-centric and insufficiently attentive to gendered realities within households and communities. Girls, in particular, experience compounded disadvantages arising from domestic responsibilities, restricted mobility, safety concerns, and limited access to digital resources.

Against this backdrop, a community-led educational intervention implemented in Thayanur village, Tamil Nadu, within the broader Illam Thedi Kalvi initiative, offers an alternative model that situates learning within homes, streets, and community spaces. Rather than treating community participation as a supplementary or neutral support mechanism, this paper examines it as a gendered process that reshapes learning spaces, redistributes pedagogic labour, and alters children's access to educational opportunities. The study asks how community participation contributes to learning outcomes and through what gendered pathways these effects are realised.

## Significance of the Study

This study is significant for three interrelated reasons. First, it contributes to debates on learning recovery and foundational literacy by foregrounding non-school actors—mothers, youth volunteers, and community groups—as pedagogic agents. Second, it brings a gender lens to community participation, demonstrating how maternal involvement and home-based learning particularly benefit girls who face structural barriers to continued schooling. Third, it documents a low-cost, replicable model that challenges the assumption that improved learning outcomes necessarily require high digital or infrastructural investments.

By critically examining Sivakumar's intervention, the study also fills an empirical gap in policy-oriented research that often celebrates community participation normatively without interrogating *how, for whom, and under what conditions* such participation translates into improved and equitable learning outcomes.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis is anchored in a feminist political economy of education, complemented by sociocultural learning theory and democratic education perspectives. Feminist scholarship emphasises that education systems are embedded in gendered divisions of labour, wherein women's unpaid care and pedagogic work sustains both households and institutions while remaining largely invisible within policy design. From this perspective, community participation cannot be assumed to be inherently empowering; its effects depend on how labour, recognition, and responsibility are distributed.

Sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978) conceptualises learning as socially mediated through interaction with more capable others, while Dewey's (1916) conception of education situates learning within community life and democratic practice. Together, these perspectives allow the study to analyse learning outcomes alongside questions of gendered labour, power, and institutional responsibility.



Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Community Participation in Gender-Just Learning Outcomes

Figure 1 (Conceptual Frame work) illustrates how community actors—mothers, youth volunteers, and local institutions—mediate learning outcomes through gendered pathways of access, time availability, emotional support, and recognition, within a broader policy context.

Gender operates at three levels: (i) access to learning spaces (home-proximal and safe environments for girls), (ii) distribution of educational labour within households, and (iii) visibility and recognition of women's contributions. Policy context (NEP 2020, welfare schemes and local governance) mediates these relationships by enabling or constraining institutional support for community-led learning. Gender operates as a cross-cutting

axis influencing access to learning spaces, time availability, participation in public activities, and self-expression. The framework therefore positions gender not as an outcome variable alone but as a structural condition shaping the entire learning ecosystem.

### **Review of Related Studies and Research Gap**

Research across diverse contexts shows that community participation and parental engagement are positively associated with improved learning outcomes, particularly in low-resource and rural settings. Studies on learning recovery during the COVID-19 pandemic further demonstrate that home-based and community-led strategies were critical in sustaining educational continuity, especially where digital access was limited (UNESCO 2021; UNICEF 2020).

However, much of this literature treats households as gender-neutral and valorises maternal participation without examining gendered divisions of labour, time poverty, or intra-household power relations (Unterhalter 2007; Stromquist 2015). Gender-focused research indicates that girls' learning is shaped by domestic responsibilities, restricted mobility, safety concerns, and unequal access to time and space for study. While community-based learning can mitigate some of these constraints through proximate and flexible learning spaces, evidence on its gender-transformative potential remains limited.

In the Indian context, despite NEP 2020's emphasis on community participation, empirical studies examining grassroots implementation—particularly through gender-sensitive pedagogic practices—are scarce. Existing evaluations remain largely outcome-focused, offering limited insight into the processes, labour relations, and conditions through which community engagement produces equitable learning outcomes. Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a feminist political economy perspective to

### **Research Gap:**

Current scholarship remains outcome-focused and insufficiently gender-critical, under-examining how community participation redistributes educational labour and whether it challenges or reproduces gender inequalities. This study responds through a process-oriented analysis of community engagement in a rural Indian context.

Feminist scholars caution that such approaches risk normalising women's unpaid care work while obscuring the conditions under which community participation may reproduce rather than transform gender inequality. Empirical studies that trace how gendered processes shape learning outcomes within community-led interventions remain limited, particularly in rural Indian contexts. This study addresses this gap by offering a process-oriented, feminist analysis that examines not only learning outcomes but also the gendered labour and institutional conditions through which they are produced.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. Assess the impact of community participation on students' learning conditions and outcomes before and after the intervention.
2. Examine gendered dimensions of participation and learning, including labour, access, and outcomes within the community-based model.
3. Document pedagogic processes and implementation strategies of the community-led intervention, including roles of families and local actors.
4. Identify challenges, sustainability constraints, and policy-relevant pathways for scaling community-based, gender-equitable education initiatives.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

The study adopts a qualitative-dominant case study approach informed by gender policy analysis. Data sources include programme documentation, activity records, gender-disaggregated participation data, case narratives,

and reflective accounts from practitioners. The focus is on understanding processes and pathways through which community participation influenced learning, rather than on estimating effect sizes through standardized testing.

Data were analyzed thematically, combining inductive insights from field material with deductive categories drawn from feminist education theory and sociocultural learning perspectives.

### Limitations of the Study

As a single-case qualitative study, the findings are analytically rather than statistically generalizable. The study does not include standardized quantitative assessments of learning gains; therefore, claims regarding learning outcomes should not be interpreted as estimates of magnitude or comparative impact. Instead, the contribution lies in illuminating the gendered processes and enabling conditions through which learning improvements occurred. Future research combining feminist case analysis with quantitative and longitudinal assessment would strengthen evidence on scalability and impact. Rather than attributing outcomes solely to the intervention, the analysis situates learning gains within intersecting social, emotional, and material conditions, emphasizing relational and contextual causality.

### Process Flow of the Community-Led Learning Intervention (SMART-HOME to Outcomes)



Figure 2 “It Takes a Village: A Blueprint for Student Success” to visualise the stepwise yet interconnected process of the intervention—from home-based pedagogy to community collaboration and institutional convergence.

### Process of Intervention

The community and women centric intervention evolved through a set of interconnected processes:

1. **Reframing the Home as a Learning Space:** Walls, doors, cupboards, and floors were transformed into learning resources using infographics and charts.
2. **Mothers as First Facilitators:** Mothers were encouraged to guide daily reading, counting, storytelling, and speaking practice, legitimizing women’s pedagogic roles.



3. Street Schools and Community Classes: Youth volunteers conducted regular learning sessions during evenings and holidays, ensuring continuity beyond formal schooling.
4. Digital-Lite Pedagogy: Limited but purposeful use of mobile phones and WhatsApp enabled inclusion without deepening digital divides.
5. Holistic Integration: Academic learning was combined with nutrition, financial literacy, cultural activities, and welfare facilitation.

## Learning Conditions Before and After the Intervention in the Thayanur Village

### Before the Intervention

- Irregular study habits, especially during holidays
- Minimal parental academic support due to low literacy
- Girls' learning constrained by domestic responsibilities
- Limited exposure to English communication and confidence-building activities

### After the Intervention

- Regular learning routines embedded in homes and community spaces
- Active maternal engagement in children's learning
- Improved attendance and participation of girls
- Enhanced communication skills, confidence, and aspiration among students

Second, gendered constraints on learning were partially mitigated. As illustrated in Figure 2 (Process Flow of the Intervention), embedding learning within supervised, home-proximal spaces enabled girls to balance domestic responsibilities with educational participation, resulting in improved retention and confidence.

## Comparative Snapshot of Learning Conditions Before and After the Intervention



Figure 3 “Community in Action: Supporting Thayanur’s Children” and highlights shifts in emotional security, confidence, and learning continuity before and after the intervention, with particular attention to girls and children facing family hardship.

The contrast highlights that learning gains were not merely academic but also socio-emotional and gendered.

### Analysis and Interpretation of Data -Empirical and Gender-Disaggregated:

In addition to academic outcomes, the intervention generated significant psycho-social gains, particularly for children experiencing family hardship, single-parenthood, or economic precarity. As reflected in the attached community-action infographic, emotional assurance, mentorship, and a sense of collective care functioned as critical enabling conditions for sustained learning engagement.

### Empirical Data based thematic analysis and learning pattern emerged:

The empirical material drawn from activity records, participation data, and case narratives was analyzed thematically with attention to gender-differentiated experiences and outcomes. Three major empirical patterns emerge.

First, foundational learning outcomes improved through repetition, proximity, and low-pressure environments. Regular home-based practice and street classes reduced fear of failure, particularly for first-generation learners. Girls demonstrated marked improvement in reading fluency and oral expression when learning occurred within supervised, familiar spaces.

Second, gendered constraints on learning were partially mitigated. Mothers' facilitation enabled girls to integrate learning with domestic routines, reducing dropout risk during holidays. Participation data indicate higher retention of girls in community classes compared to earlier school-only arrangements. Public speaking, cultural activities, and leadership roles contributed to increased self-confidence and visibility of girls in community spaces.

Third, enabling conditions such as nutritional support, emotional mentoring, and welfare facilitation functioned as indirect but critical determinants of learning. Access to documents, bank accounts, and welfare schemes stabilized household conditions, allowing children—especially girls—to prioritize schooling.

### Gender-Differentiated Outcome Pathways and Enabling Conditions



Figure 4: Gender-Differentiated Outcome Pathways and Enabling Conditions

Figure 4 integrates insights to synthesize how emotional assurance, mentorship networks, welfare support, and women's pedagogic labour interact to produce gender-differentiated learning outcomes.

Interpretively, these findings suggest that learning gains cannot be understood independently of gendered social relations. Community participation enhanced learning outcomes most effectively when it simultaneously addressed material deprivation, emotional security, and gendered access to time and space. The mothers, block level resource teacher educators (BRTE) and district educational training institute (DIET) and community and school management collectively contributed to the change and enhanced learning outcomes among the rural children.

### **Gendered Dynamics of Community-Based Learning: Policy Narrative**

The case narratives show that community-based learning interventions operate within—and actively reshape—gendered relations of care, labour, and knowledge, rather than functioning as neutral mechanisms for improving learning outcomes. Girls from single-parent and economically marginal households benefited disproportionately because these households are positioned at the intersection of poverty, feminised care responsibility, and educational precarity. By relocating learning to proximate community spaces, the intervention reduced constraints related to girls' time, mobility, and safety—key structural barriers embedded in the gendered organisation of everyday life.

A significant policy-relevant outcome of the intervention was the legitimisation of girls' voices within semi-public learning spaces. Through structured participation in storytelling, peer teaching, and public speaking, girls moved from marginal, silent roles to visible and expressive learners. This shift highlights that learning gains were inseparable from changes in confidence, agency, and social recognition—dimensions often overlooked in outcome-driven policy frameworks. The intervention thus demonstrates that pedagogic design can function as a gender-transformative tool when it explicitly challenges norms of silence and subordination.

The intervention also reconfigured dominant assumptions about knowledge production. By positioning girls as peer educators, it disrupted hierarchical and masculinised models of authority, enabling girls to accrue symbolic and social legitimacy within families and communities. From a policy perspective, this underscores the importance of recognising informal and peer-based pedagogies as credible contributors to learning ecosystems, rather than treating them as auxiliary or temporary measures.

Mothers emerged as the central infrastructure sustaining the intervention, performing organisational, pedagogic, and emotional labour that made learning continuity possible. While their recognition as facilitators challenges school-centric notions of expertise, the case narratives also reveal a critical policy tension. The intervention relied heavily on women's unpaid and elastic labour, exposing risks of role overload and burnout in the absence of institutional support. This highlights a core feminist policy concern: community participation can reproduce gender inequality when women's labour is mobilised without redistribution, remuneration, or formal recognition.

### **Challenges**

The findings point to structural challenges that must be addressed through policy rather than voluntarism:

- Fragile sustainability of volunteer-driven models
- Risk of intensifying women's unpaid labour
- Limited formal recognition within education systems
- Difficulties in scaling without contextual adaptation

These challenges indicate that community-led education cannot be sustained through moral appeals to participation alone.

To translate community-based learning into a sustainable and gender-just strategy, the study identifies the following policy directions:

- Formal recognition of community educators, including certification, training, and linkage with School Management Committees

- Gender-responsive operational guidelines addressing girls' safety, time poverty, and domestic workloads
- Institutional integration with schools and DIETs for academic mentoring and continuity
- Convergence of education and welfare systems to stabilise learning conditions for marginalised households
- Gender-disaggregated monitoring frameworks to ensure accountability and equity

The study demonstrates that community participation is not merely a supplementary input but a structural lever for improving educational equity in resource-constrained contexts. It provides empirical grounding for operationalising NEP 2020's emphasis on community engagement, while cautioning against policy designs that invisibilise women's labour.

More broadly, the findings argue for a shift from school-centric reform to learning ecosystems that integrate homes, communities, and institutions. Such a shift requires explicit feminist policy commitments to recognising, resourcing, and redistributing educational labour. Without this, community participation risks becoming a cost-saving substitute for public investment rather than a pathway to gender-just educational transformation.

This study demonstrates that community participation enhances learning outcomes not as a neutral technical strategy, but as a deeply gendered social process embedded in everyday relations of care, labour, and power. By relocating learning into homes and community spaces, the intervention reduced structural constraints related to girls' time, mobility, safety, and domestic responsibilities, enabling more consistent participation and engagement—particularly among the most marginalised.

From a gender policy perspective, the findings make visible the central role of women's unpaid pedagogic labour in sustaining educational innovation. Mothers functioned as key educational agents, organising routines, mediating access to learning spaces, and providing emotional support essential for learning continuity. While this challenges school-centric and masculinised notions of pedagogic authority, it also exposes a critical risk: without institutional recognition and support, community-led models may reproduce gender inequality by normalising the extraction of women's unpaid labour.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Drawing on the empirical findings and feminist policy analysis, the study proposes the following policy recommendations to institutionalise community participation as a gender-just and sustainable component of the education system, rather than as an ad hoc or volunteer-dependent practice.

### **Formal Recognition of Community Educators and Women Facilitators**

Education policy must formally recognise mothers, youth volunteers, and community educators as legitimate pedagogic actors. This can be achieved through:

- Certification and short-term training modules facilitated by DIETs and Block Resource Centres.
- Formal linkage of community educators with School Management Committees (SMCs).
- Honoraria or performance-based incentives to prevent the over-reliance on women's unpaid labour.

Such recognition would address the feminist policy concern of invisibilized care work while strengthening accountability and continuity.

### **Gender-Responsive Design of Community Learning Programmes**

Community-led learning initiatives should be guided by explicit gender-responsive operational guidelines, including:



- Flexible scheduling that accommodates girls' domestic workloads.
- Safe, home-proximal learning spaces to address mobility and safety concerns.
- Designated roles for encouraging girls' leadership, public speaking, and peer teaching.

Without such safeguards, community participation risks reproducing existing gender hierarchies rather than transforming them.

### **Institutional Integration with Schools and Teacher Education Systems**

Community-based learning must be embedded within the formal education system rather than positioned as a temporary substitute. Policy should ensure:

- Academic mentoring and curriculum alignment through regular engagement with school teachers, BRTes, and DIET faculty.
- Recognition of community learning spaces as complementary extensions of schooling, particularly during holidays and learning recovery phases.

This integration would reduce fragmentation and enhance pedagogic coherence.

### **Convergence of Education and Social Protection Systems**

The findings demonstrate that learning outcomes are shaped by nutrition, emotional security, and household stability. Policy frameworks should therefore:

- Strengthen convergence between education departments and welfare schemes (nutrition, documentation, social security).
- Enable schools and community educators to act as facilitators for accessing welfare entitlements for vulnerable households.

Such convergence recognises learning as embedded within broader social and economic conditions.

### **Gender-Disaggregated Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms**

To ensure equity, community participation initiatives must incorporate:

- Gender-disaggregated indicators on participation, retention, and learning conditions.
- Monitoring frameworks that track women's labour contributions alongside student outcomes.
- Qualitative indicators capturing confidence, voice, and agency, particularly among girls.

This would move policy evaluation beyond narrow outcome metrics toward a more holistic understanding of educational equity.

### **Safeguarding Against the Feminisation of Educational Responsibility**

Finally, policy must explicitly guard against shifting state responsibility onto women and communities under the guise of participation. Community-led models should complement—not replace—public investment in schooling, staffing, and infrastructure. Feminist policy commitments require that educational labour be recognised, resourced, and redistributed, rather than assumed as voluntary care work.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that community participation enhances learning outcomes not as a neutral technical input but as a gendered social process rooted in care, proximity, and relational labour. By relocating learning into homes and community spaces, the intervention reduced structural barriers related to girls' time, mobility, safety, and domestic responsibilities, leading to improved engagement, confidence, and continuity in learning. At the same time, the findings make visible a critical policy tension: women's unpaid pedagogic labour emerged as the central infrastructure sustaining educational innovation, raising concerns about sustainability and gender equity. In the short term, education policy must institutionalise community participation through formal recognition, basic training, and gender-responsive guidelines, alongside simple gender-disaggregated monitoring and convergence with welfare systems to stabilise learning conditions. Over the longer term, community-based learning must be embedded within the public education ecosystem through integration with teacher education, gender-responsive budgeting, and durable coordination between schools, DIETs, and local governance institutions. Without such measures, community participation risks becoming a cost-saving substitute for public investment; with them, it can function as a structurally transformative pathway towards gender-just and equitable education.

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