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Curriculum, Gender, and Sustainability: A Study of Text and Context

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Abstract: ***The curriculum occupies a central position in shaping learners' knowledge, values, attitudes, and worldviews. In the contemporary global context, concerns related to gender equality and sustainability have become increasingly significant, demanding deliberate integration within educational curricula. This article explores the interrelationship between curriculum, gender, and sustainability through a study of text and context. It examines how curricular texts represent gender roles, identities, and relations, and how these representations align with or contradict the broader socio-cultural and environmental contexts in which education operates. Drawing upon theoretical perspectives from gender studies, sustainable development, and curriculum theory, the paper argues that a gender-sensitive and sustainability-oriented curriculum is essential for fostering inclusive, equitable, and responsible citizenship. The study highlights gaps between policy intentions and curricular practice, and emphasizes the need for contextualized, inclusive curricular reforms that promote gender justice and sustainable development simultaneously.***

Keywords: Curriculum, Gender, Sustainability, Inclusivity, Text and Context.

I. INTRODUCTION

Education is a powerful tool for social transformation, with the curriculum shaping what knowledge is valued and how society is represented. Growing global challenges such as climate change, inequality, and gender discrimination have intensified debates about educational purpose. As a result, sustainability and gender equality have become essential priorities within contemporary curricular frameworks. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality), emphasize the importance of equal access to education for all individuals regardless of gender (Damanik, 2025). Research by Unterhalter (2021) and reports from UNESCO (2023) highlight that gender inclusive education plays a crucial role in developing students' understanding of equality, fairness, and social justice.

Sustainability is a multidimensional concept that goes beyond environmental conservation to encompass social and economic concerns, with a strong focus on equity, justice, and responsibility toward future generations. Gender, understood as a socially constructed category, shapes individuals' access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making power and is deeply connected to sustainability challenges.

Environmental degradation and unsustainable development tend to affect women and other marginalized genders more severely. As a result, the inclusion of gender perspectives within sustainability education is not optional but essential.

This article undertakes a study of curriculum, gender, and sustainability through the lens of text and context. 'Text' refers to curricular documents such as syllabi, textbooks, and policy frameworks, while 'context' encompasses the socio-cultural, economic, political, and ecological realities in which these texts are produced and implemented. By analysing both dimensions, the paper seeks to understand how curricula can contribute to or hinder the goals of gender equality and sustainable development.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study is undertaken with the following objectives:

1) Q1. To analyse the relationship between curriculum and socio-cultural context with reference to gender inclusivity and sustainability.
2) Q2. To identify gaps between curricular intentions and classroom realities concerning gender and sustainability.
3) Q3. To explore the provisions of NEP 2020 related to gender equity and sustainable development in education.
4) Q4. To suggest measures for integrating gender-sensitive and sustainability-oriented perspectives into curriculum design and practice.

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III. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research methodology based on secondary sources. The analysis is primarily theoretical and interpretative in nature.

The sources of data include:

1) School textbooks (Environmental Studies, Science, Social Science, and Language) at primary and secondary levels

2) Curriculum frameworks and policy documents, particularly the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

3) Books, research articles, and reports related to curriculum studies, gender studies, and education for sustainable development

A textual analysis approach is used to examine how gender roles and sustainability themes are represented in curricular materials. This is complemented by a contextual analysis that considers socio-cultural norms, institutional practices, and policy environments influencing curriculum implementation. The methodology enables an integrated understanding of curriculum as both a textual and contextual construct.

IV. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A. Curriculum as a Social Construct

Curriculum is not a neutral body of knowledge; rather, it is socially constructed and shaped by historical, cultural, political and economic forces. The selection of knowledge included in the curriculum reflects the values and priorities of dominant social groups, often privileging certain perspectives while marginalizing others (Apple, 2019). curriculum influences how learners perceive social issues, and when it is designed without critical engagement with diversity and structural inequality, it can perpetuate existing injustices (Coker et al., 2024). Scholars have argued that curricula often reproduce dominant ideologies, marginalizing certain voices while privileging others, thereby reinforcing existing social hierarchies within education systems (Giroux, 2022). Decisions regarding content selection, pedagogical approaches, and assessment practices are not value-neutral; rather, they are shaped by cultural norms, institutional priorities, and political agendas that influence what knowledge is considered legitimate and worthwhile (OECD, 2023).

From this perspective, curriculum becomes a site of struggle where issues of gender and sustainability are negotiated. A critical examination of curricular texts can reveal implicit biases, stereotypes, and omissions related to gender and environmental concerns. At the same time, curriculum holds transformative potential when it consciously incorporates inclusive and sustainable perspectives.

B. Understanding Gender in Education

Gender Education involves recognizing how socially constructed roles, expectations, and power relations related to gender shape access to learning, classroom experiences, participation, and outcomes for learners. It refers to the ways in which educational systems construct and reinforce notions of masculinity and femininity, as well as how they address or ignore gender diversity. Traditional curricula have often portrayed men as active agents and women as passive supporters, reinforcing patriarchal norms. Subjects such as science, technology, and environmental studies have historically been male-dominated, both in representation and participation.

Recent research shows that education both reflects and reinforces gender ideologies, as school practices, hidden curricula, and social expectations contribute to stereotype formation and reproduction unless consciously addressed in teaching and learning processes (Hossain & Islam, 2024).

V. SUSTAINABILITY AND EDUCATION

Sustainability in education is commonly framed within the concept of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which aims to equip learners with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary to contribute to a sustainable future. ESD emphasizes holistic learning, critical thinking, and participatory approaches.

Recent studies highlight the central role of education in advancing sustainability by fostering awareness, critical thinking, and responsible citizenship. Education for sustainable development encourages learners to understand complex global challenges such as climate change, poverty, and gender inequality, and to actively participate in creating sustainable solutions (Malik et al, 2025). Scholars argue that sustainability cannot be achieved without addressing social dimensions, particularly gender equity, as unequal access to education and resources undermines sustainable outcomes (Yadav et al., 2025).

Therefore, integrating gender perspectives into sustainability education enhances its relevance and effectiveness, enabling learners to understand complex interconnections between social and environmental systems.

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1) Result:1- Relationship between Curriculum and Socio-Cultural Context with Reference to Gender Inclusivity and Sustainability

The findings of the study indicate a close and reciprocal relationship between curriculum and the socio-cultural context in shaping perspectives on gender inclusivity and sustainability. Curriculum is not an isolated or neutral entity; rather, it reflects dominant social values, cultural norms, and power relations prevalent within society (Apple, 2019). In socio-cultural contexts marked by patriarchal structures and gender hierarchies, curricular texts often reinforce traditional gender roles and marginalize women and non-dominant gender identities, thereby limiting critical engagement with issues of equity and sustainability (Stromquist, 2021).

The analysis further reveals that sustainability-related content in curricula is frequently presented in a gender-neutral manner, which obscures the differentiated impacts of environmental degradation on women and marginalized groups. Such representations reflect broader socio-cultural tendencies to separate environmental concerns from social justice issues (UNESCO, 2023). As a result, learners may fail to develop a holistic understanding of sustainability that incorporates equity, justice, and intergenerational responsibility. Gender-inclusive curricula foster students' awareness of equality, fairness, and responsible citizenship by linking lived social experiences with environmental challenges (Unterhalter, 2006)

2) Result:2 Gaps between Curricular Intentions and Classroom Realities in Relation to Gender and Sustainability

a) Curriculum Texts: Representation of Gender and Sustainability

Curricular texts such as textbooks and syllabi strongly influence how learners understand society. An analysis of these materials often shows patterns of gender representation and the attention given to sustainability. In many contexts, textbooks still reflect gender bias, with men commonly portrayed in leadership, scientific, and decision-making roles, while women are shown in domestic or supportive roles. Such portrayals subtly reinforce traditional gender norms and can limit students' aspirations.

The findings of the study reveal a significant gap between curricular intentions and actual classroom practices concerning gender inclusivity and sustainability. Although curriculum frameworks and policy documents increasingly emphasize gender equality, inclusive education, and sustainability, these intentions are only partially reflected in everyday teaching–learning processes (UNESCO, 2023). While textbooks and syllabi formally incorporate themes of gender equity and environmental responsibility, classroom instruction often remains content-driven and examination-oriented, limiting opportunities for critical discussion and reflective engagement (Giroux, 2020).

The analysis indicates that gender-sensitive and sustainability-related concepts are frequently treated as peripheral topics rather than integral components of core learning. Teachers tend to address these issues superficially due to time constraints, rigid syllabi, and lack of pedagogical support (Stromquist, 2015; Sterling, 2018). As a result, traditional gender stereotypes and gender-neutral representations of sustainability persist in classroom interactions, even when curricular texts advocate inclusive and transformative perspectives (Connell, 2009; Leach, 2016).

Furthermore, socio-cultural norms and teachers' own beliefs significantly influence classroom realities. In contexts shaped by patriarchal attitudes, educators may unconsciously reinforce conventional gender roles, thereby undermining curricular goals related to equality and sustainable development (Unterhalter, 2021). The absence of adequate teacher training and professional development in gender-responsive and sustainability-oriented pedagogy further widens the gap between policy intent and practice (Stromquist & Monkman, 2014; UNESCO, 2023). Overall, the result demonstrates that without sustained institutional support, teacher sensitization, and contextual adaptation, curricular intentions related to gender and sustainability remain largely aspirational rather than transformative.

b) Textbook Examples from School Curriculum

Examples from school textbooks help illustrate how gender and sustainability are represented in curricular texts. In several primary-level Environmental Studies (EVS) textbooks, chapters on family, work, and community often depict fathers going to work outside the home while mothers are shown cooking, cleaning, or caring for children.

In upper primary and secondary Geography textbooks, topics like agriculture, climate change, and resource management commonly highlight male farmers, scientists, or policymakers. Women's roles in sustainable agriculture, seed preservation, or water management are either minimally mentioned or presented as supplementary information. This limits students' understanding of women as active agents in sustainable development.

A more inclusive example can be found in revised Social Science textbooks, where chapters on development and environment include case studies of women-led self-help groups involved in waste management, afforestation, or water conservation. These examples demonstrate how textbooks can integrate gender and sustainability meaningfully by presenting women as leaders and decision-makers in environmental initiatives.

3) Result: 3 Provisions of NEP 2020 Related to Gender Equity and Sustainable Development

The analysis of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reveals a strong commitment to promoting gender equity and sustainable development as integral goals of the education system. NEP 2020 explicitly recognizes gender disparities in access, participation, and learning outcomes, and proposes the establishment of a Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) to support targeted interventions for girls and socio-economically disadvantaged groups (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020). Measures such as scholarships, conditional cash transfers, bicycle provisions, and the creation of safe and inclusive school environments are intended to reduce dropout rates and enhance girls' retention and transition across educational stages. NEP 2020 also explicitly commits to removing biases and stereotypes from school curriculum by introducing materials that promote respect for diversity, empathy, tolerance, human rights, and gender equality. These values are to be embedded early in schooling to cultivate inclusive mindsets in learners.

In terms of curriculum and pedagogy, NEP 2020 emphasizes gender sensitization, flexible learning pathways, and the removal of rigid gender stereotypes through curricular reforms and teacher training (MoE, 2020). Teachers are envisioned as key agents in fostering equitable classroom practices and inclusive learning cultures. With regard to sustainable development, NEP 2020 aligns education with the principles of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) by integrating environmental awareness, climate change education, and sustainable lifestyles across disciplines rather than treating them as isolated topics (UNESCO, 2017; MoE, 2020). The policy highlights the role of education in developing responsible citizenship, ecological consciousness, and ethical decision-making necessary for long-term sustainability.

4) Result 4: some suggestion for Integrating Gender and Sustainability in Curriculum

To address the gaps between text and context, deliberate strategies are required to integrate gender and sustainability into curriculum design and practice.

1) Curriculum development should adopt an intersectional approach that recognizes the interconnectedness of gender, class, caste, ethnicity, and environmental issues. This approach ensures that diverse perspectives are included and that sustainability education does not overlook social inequalities.

2) Curriculum designers should ensure balanced representation of women and marginalized groups across subjects and include contributions related to environmental conservation and sustainable development. Textbooks should consciously avoid gender stereotypes and incorporate real-life sustainability challenges.

3) Instead of treating gender and sustainability only as academic themes, curriculum design should include everyday life experience. Learners can be guided to create visual maps showing how gender roles intersect with environmental resources in their communities. Students should be allowed to design small curriculum extensions—such as supplementary readings, posters, or digital content—on gender and sustainability issues they find missing in textbooks.

4) Pedagogy plays a critical role in translating curriculum into practice. Participatory and learner-entered pedagogies encourage critical reflection on gender norms and sustainability challenges. Project-based learning, community engagement, and experiential activities can help students understand real-world implications and develop problem-solving skills.

5) Pre-service and in-service teacher education programs must include components on gender sensitization and education for sustainable development to help teachers recognize bias and foster inclusive classroom environments (MoE, 2020). Teacher education and professional development are equally important. Educators must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to address gender and sustainability effectively.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study of curriculum, gender, and sustainability through text and context reveals both challenges and possibilities. While curricular texts increasingly acknowledge the importance of sustainability and inclusivity, gaps remain in their representation of gender and their responsiveness to contextual realities. A curriculum that truly integrates gender and sustainability must go beyond symbolic inclusion to address structural inequalities and promote critical engagement. Such a curriculum empowers learners to question dominant narratives, recognize interconnected challenges, and contribute actively to social and environmental well-being. Ultimately, aligning curriculum with the principles of gender equality and sustainability is not only an educational imperative but also a moral and social responsibility.

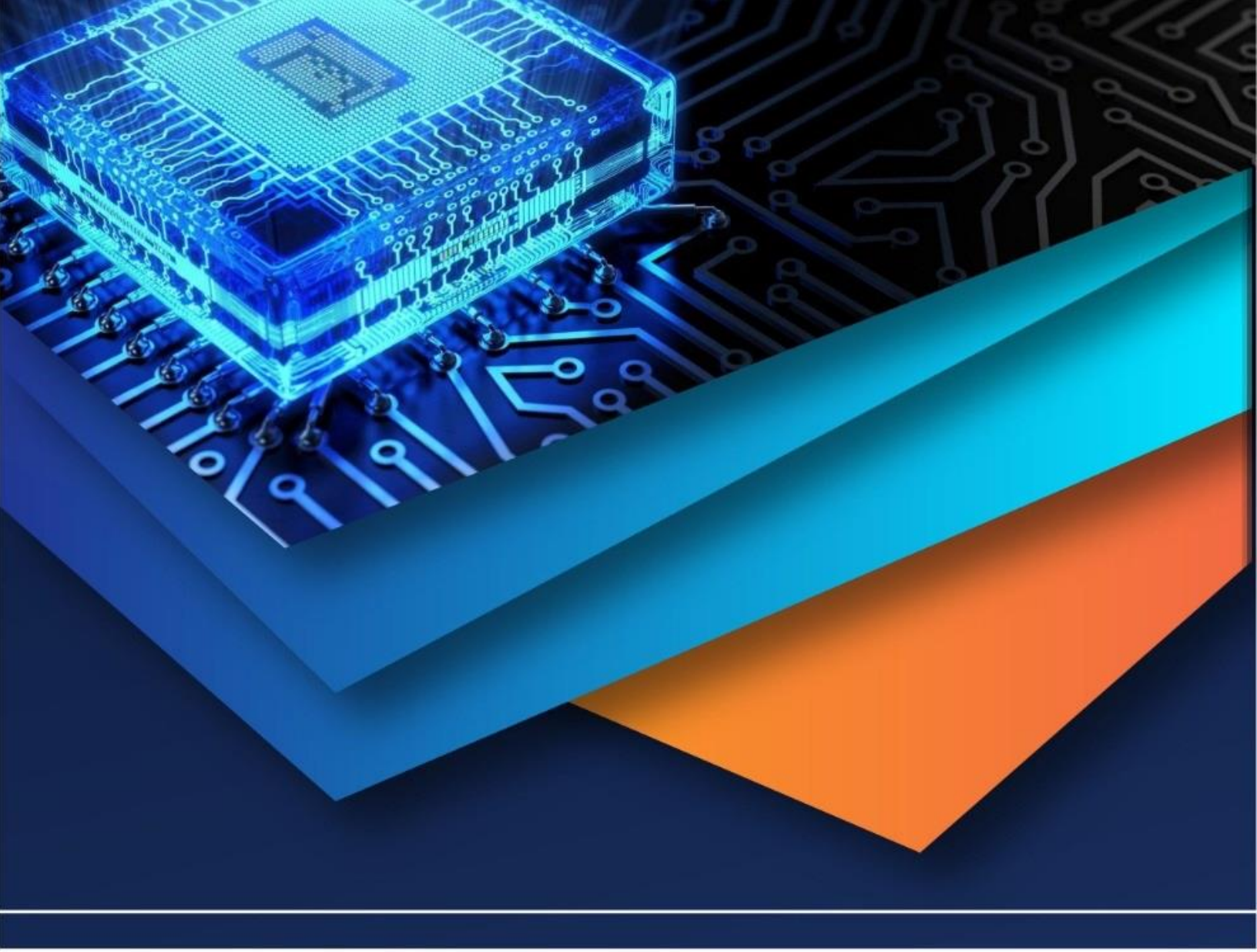
participating in community sustainability efforts help challenge stereotypes and promote inclusive thinking among learners. A progressive curriculum text consciously incorporates gender-inclusive language, balanced visuals, and diverse narratives. It links sustainability with everyday lived experiences and highlights how gender equity strengthens sustainable outcomes.

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