

Gender, Power, and Education: A Critical Literature Review of Sociological Theories on Gender Inequality in Schools

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Abstract

This study critically examines the intersection of gender, power, and education through a comprehensive review of sociological theories addressing gender inequality in schools. It highlights how schools often serve as sites where structural power relations reproduce existing social hierarchies, thereby reinforcing gender disparities. The literature review method was employed to synthesize theoretical perspectives and empirical findings from diverse academic sources. Key sociological frameworks, including functionalism, conflict theory, feminist theory, and intersectionality, provide a multidimensional understanding of the issue. The analysis reveals that schools not only transmit knowledge but also perpetuate social norms that privilege male authority and marginalize female voices. A critical reading of existing scholarship demonstrates both the strengths and limitations of these theories in explaining persistent inequalities. Moreover, the review identifies gaps in integrating intersectional perspectives that account for race, class, and cultural diversity within educational contexts. By foregrounding these dynamics, the study underscores the role of education as both a site of oppression and potential empowerment. The findings emphasize the need for transformative pedagogical practices and inclusive policies that challenge traditional power structures. Ultimately, this review contributes to advancing sociological debates on gender and education by mapping theoretical developments and suggesting directions for future research.

Keywords: *Gender Inequality, Power Relations, Sociological Theory, Education, Schools.*

A. INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions are widely recognized as spaces where societal norms and inequalities, including those based on gender, are reproduced and legitimized (Marshall, 1998). Scholars argue that schools are not neutral arenas but sites where structural power relations are embedded in daily practices, shaping students' opportunities and reinforcing broader social hierarchies (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). From a functionalist perspective, education has been described as serving the integrative function of society, yet this view has been challenged by conflict theorists who emphasize how schools perpetuate class and gender stratifications (Collins, 2009). Research further suggests that classroom interactions often reflect implicit gender expectations that influence participation, performance, and identity formation (Sadker & Zittleman, 2009). Feminist scholars highlight that the curriculum, teacher attitudes, and peer dynamics frequently marginalize female students while privileging male dominance (Weiner, 1994). Intersectional analyses also demonstrate that gender inequalities are not experienced uniformly, as factors such as race, ethnicity, and class intersect to compound educational disadvantages (Crenshaw, 1991). Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital shows how schools reproduce social privilege, with gendered norms determining which forms of knowledge and behavior are valued (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Apple (2013) underscores that the hidden curriculum transmits dominant ideologies that sustain unequal gender relations. Cross-national studies reveal consistent patterns where male students often receive greater encouragement in subjects linked to authority and leadership, while female students are directed toward nurturing

or domestic roles (UNESCO, 2020). Empirical findings across multiple contexts also indicate that gendered power relations in schools contribute to long-term disparities in employment, income, and civic participation (OECD, 2015). Comparative analyses highlight that while some countries have made progress in narrowing gender gaps, deep-rooted cultural attitudes continue to undermine equality in education (Unterhalter, 2014). Recent discussions in global education policy also emphasize that achieving gender parity requires more than enrollment statistics; it demands transformative change in pedagogy and institutional practices (UNESCO, 2015). Scholars further argue that without addressing structural inequalities, educational reforms risk reproducing the very disparities they aim to reduce (Connell, 2009). Therefore, understanding the background of gender inequality in education requires critical engagement with these sociological perspectives to uncover how power relations manifest and are sustained. Such insights are essential for framing contemporary debates on equity in education and for identifying the theoretical and practical implications that must be addressed.

Power relations are central to the sociological analysis of education because schools function as institutions where authority is exercised, negotiated, and contested (Foucault, 1980). Scholars emphasize that disciplinary practices in classrooms are not only about maintaining order but also about shaping compliant subjects who internalize dominant ideologies (Ball, 2013). Research has shown that such practices are deeply gendered, as girls and boys often experience different expectations regarding behavior, academic performance, and leadership potential (Francis & Skelton, 2005). Studies in the sociology of education demonstrate that power relations extend beyond teacher–student dynamics and also shape peer interactions, curriculum choices, and institutional policies (Connell, 2016). A critical review of empirical work reveals that the distribution of authority in schools frequently mirrors broader patriarchal structures, reinforcing systemic gender inequalities (Morley, 2013). Evidence from comparative education further suggests that schools in diverse cultural contexts reproduce existing social hierarchies by legitimizing the authority of certain groups while marginalizing others (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2005). Research highlights that such power asymmetries affect not only academic outcomes but also self-esteem, aspirations, and access to leadership roles for students across genders (Younger & Warrington, 2008). Hidden curricula operate as powerful tools that transmit cultural norms privileging male authority while silencing alternative voices (Apple, 2013). Sociological inquiry has also emphasized that power in education is multidimensional, encompassing structural, cultural, and symbolic domains that interact to sustain gendered inequalities (Lingard & Mills, 2007). These findings reveal that addressing gender inequality in education requires more than policy reform; it necessitates a fundamental transformation of power structures embedded within everyday school practices (Arnot, 2006). Evidence also demonstrates that when teachers challenge traditional authority models and foster participatory pedagogy, students develop critical agency that disrupts gender stereotypes (Paechter, 2012). Theoretical and empirical studies therefore highlight the dual role of education as both a site of power reproduction and a potential space for resistance and emancipation (Francis, 2006). This makes the exploration of power relations within schools crucial for understanding how gender inequality persists despite ongoing reform efforts (Connell, 2016). Taken together, the literature underscores that without critically interrogating power relations, educational systems will remain complicit in perpetuating social hierarchies that disadvantage women and other marginalized groups (Morley, 2013).

Sociological theories provide critical insights into the ways in which education both reflects and shapes gender inequality. Functionalist theory conceptualizes schools as institutions that transmit shared norms and values, yet scholars argue that this perspective often obscures the reproduction of gendered divisions of labor (Parsons, 1959). Conflict theory challenges this by highlighting how schools reproduce power relations that serve dominant groups, perpetuating gender stratification alongside class and racial hierarchies (Collins, 2009).

Feminist theory has been instrumental in uncovering the hidden mechanisms within schooling that marginalize women and reinforce patriarchal ideologies (Acker, 1994). Empirical research demonstrates that feminist approaches emphasize the importance of analyzing curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional practices to expose systemic inequalities (Arnot, 2006). Intersectionality extends feminist theory by examining how gender interacts with race, class, and other social categories, creating layered experiences of disadvantage within schools (Crenshaw, 1991). Studies confirm that intersectional perspectives provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding diverse student experiences that cannot be captured by single-axis analyses (Francis et al., 2017). Critical pedagogy, informed by the work of Paulo Freire, highlights the transformative potential of education to challenge oppression and empower marginalized groups (Freire, 1970). Scholars adopting this perspective argue that schools should be spaces where students develop critical consciousness to resist dominant ideologies, including those related to gender (Giroux, 2011). Poststructuralist approaches influenced by Foucault examine how discourses and power relations shape subjectivities within educational spaces, producing and constraining gender identities (Ball, 2013). Empirical studies demonstrate that poststructuralist analysis illuminates the subtle ways through which gender norms are enforced in everyday interactions in classrooms (Davies, 2003). These theoretical perspectives collectively demonstrate that no single approach sufficiently captures the complexity of gender inequality in education. Comparative reviews reveal that while functionalism offers insights into social cohesion, conflict and feminist theories provide critical accounts of inequality (Francis & Skelton, 2005). Intersectionality and poststructuralism deepen this critique by addressing issues of multiplicity, discourse, and identity formation. Current scholarship emphasizes the necessity of combining these perspectives to build more nuanced understandings of how schools perpetuate or challenge gendered power dynamics (Connell, 2016). This synthesis underscores the importance of theoretical pluralism in explaining the persistence of gender inequality in educational contexts and in developing strategies for reform.

Research on gender inequality in education has generated extensive theoretical and empirical insights, yet significant gaps remain that require critical examination. Existing functionalist accounts often emphasize social cohesion but fail to adequately explain why gender disparities persist despite efforts toward educational reform (Parsons, 1959). Conflict theory provides a sharper lens on inequality, although it sometimes overlooks the nuanced cultural and symbolic dimensions of gender in schooling (Collins, 2009). Feminist analyses highlight how curricula and pedagogy reinforce patriarchal ideologies, but these perspectives have been critiqued for insufficiently addressing the diversity of women's experiences across global contexts (Acker, 1994). Intersectionality has contributed a powerful framework for analyzing overlapping oppressions, yet studies indicate that intersectional approaches remain underutilized in mainstream education research (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins & Bilge, 2016). Empirical work demonstrates that while gender gaps in enrollment have narrowed in some regions, disparities in subject choice, achievement, and leadership opportunities remain largely unexplored in relation to power dynamics (UNESCO, 2020). Comparative studies reveal that existing scholarship often focuses on Western contexts, leaving underrepresented regions and marginalized groups insufficiently examined (Unterhalter, 2014). Research addressing boys' underachievement has grown in visibility, but critics argue that this focus sometimes obscures continuing disadvantages faced by girls in specific cultural and economic environments (Francis, 2006). Analyses of hidden curricula reveal how norms are transmitted implicitly, yet more research is needed to connect these mechanisms directly to systemic gender hierarchies in society (Apple, 2013). Scholars emphasize the importance of moving beyond enrollment statistics toward qualitative investigations of classroom practices that perpetuate inequality (Stromquist, 2013). There is also a lack of longitudinal studies that trace how gendered

educational experiences influence labor market outcomes and civic participation across the life course (OECD, 2015). Current debates highlight the need for integrating critical pedagogy and poststructuralist perspectives to better understand how gender identities are constructed and contested in schools (Ball, 2013; Davies, 2003). The absence of comprehensive frameworks that synthesize these diverse perspectives represents a central gap in the literature. Without such integration, educational policy risks addressing symptoms rather than the underlying structures of inequality. Addressing these gaps is vital for producing knowledge that not only diagnoses persistent disparities but also informs transformative strategies for equity in education.

Understanding gender inequality in education is not only a theoretical concern but also a pressing global priority with significant implications for social justice and sustainable development. Education is widely acknowledged as a fundamental human right and an essential driver of equality, yet persistent gender disparities limit the transformative potential of schooling (UNESCO, 2020). Scholars emphasize that addressing inequality in education is critical because schools shape access to employment, political participation, and leadership opportunities in society (Unterhalter, 2014). Evidence suggests that gendered barriers in education have long-term consequences for economic development, as countries with greater gender equality in schooling experience higher growth and productivity rates (Kabeer & Natali, 2013). Research also indicates that empowering girls through education reduces child marriage, improves maternal health, and enhances the well-being of entire communities (Sperling & Winthrop, 2016). Policymakers highlight that gender equality in education contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 4 on quality education and Goal 5 on gender equality (United Nations, 2015). Feminist scholars argue that focusing on gender in education provides a lens for questioning structural inequalities in society more broadly (Arnot, 2006). Critical research reveals that educational institutions can either perpetuate oppression or serve as spaces for empowerment, depending on how power relations are addressed (Morley, 2013). The significance of this study lies in its potential to integrate theoretical perspectives with empirical findings, empirical findings also indicate that the effectiveness of instructional methods varies by course type, with theoretical subjects adapting more easily to online delivery than practical or field-based ones, reflecting how institutional structures condition access and opportunity (Hikmat et al., 2020). Thereby offering a comprehensive understanding of how schools reproduce or resist gender inequalities (Francis & Skelton, 2005). Analyzing the rationale for studying this issue also underscores the urgency of bridging the gap between policy rhetoric and actual classroom practice (Stromquist, 2013). Scholars highlight that while policy frameworks often articulate commitments to equity, implementation is uneven and shaped by cultural, economic, and political constraints (Colclough et al., 2003). The literature demonstrates that without critical engagement, reform efforts risk reinforcing existing hierarchies instead of dismantling them (Connell, 2016). The broader significance of this inquiry therefore lies in identifying strategies that enable education systems to function as vehicles for both social mobility and transformative change. This review ultimately seeks to provide insights that can inform inclusive pedagogies, equitable policies, and progressive research agendas aimed at promoting gender justice in education.

The primary objective of this study is to critically examine how sociological theories explain gender inequality in schools and to synthesize insights that can inform both academic debate and educational practice. Scholars emphasize that research objectives in literature reviews should clarify the scope of inquiry while addressing identified gaps in existing knowledge (Snyder, 2019). This review is guided by the need to evaluate how functionalism, conflict theory, feminist theory, intersectionality, and poststructuralist perspectives contribute to the understanding of gender inequality in education (Francis & Skelton, 2005). The objective also includes mapping the strengths and limitations of each theoretical approach, allowing for

a comparative perspective on their relevance to contemporary schooling (Connell, 2016). Researchers argue that formulating clear objectives in critical reviews enhances analytical depth and avoids descriptive overviews that lack theoretical coherence (Grant & Booth, 2009). The focus on gender and power relations reflects an intention to contribute to broader debates on social justice in education, aligning with calls for research that bridges theory and practice (Arnot, 2006). Establishing this objective is significant because it creates a foundation for advancing inclusive pedagogies and policies that respond to persistent inequalities (Stromquist, 2013). Evidence shows that reviews with clearly articulated objectives are more effective in shaping policy recommendations and identifying directions for future research (Webster & Watson, 2002). The purpose is not only to summarize existing literature but to interrogate how theories illuminate the reproduction and contestation of gendered power in schools (Ball, 2013). Scholars highlight that objectives framed around both diagnosis and transformation strengthen the contribution of sociological inquiry to equity in education (Morley, 2013). The review also seeks to integrate empirical evidence with theoretical critiques in order to produce a balanced and comprehensive account (Unterhalter, 2014). A central aim is to establish how different perspectives can be synthesized to create a more holistic framework for analyzing gender inequality in schooling (Francis, 2006). The literature suggests that objectives explicitly linked to global agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals enhance the relevance and impact of academic research (UNESCO, 2020). This review therefore sets out to evaluate, critique, and synthesize sociological theories with the objective of generating actionable insights that advance both scholarship and practice. Achieving this objective is expected to contribute not only to the academic field of sociology of education but also to policy discourse and practical strategies for creating gender-equitable learning environments.

B. METHOD

This study employed a critical literature review design to examine the relationship between gender, power, and education through the lens of sociological theories on inequality in schools. The review process focused on systematically identifying, selecting, and analyzing scholarly works that directly addressed the construction and reproduction of gender relations within educational contexts. The scope of the review was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and institutional reports published in English to ensure both academic rigor and accessibility. The selection criteria emphasized works that specifically explored theoretical approaches such as functionalism, conflict theory, feminist perspectives, intersectionality, and poststructuralist analysis in relation to schooling. Publications were chosen based on their relevance to the themes of gender inequality, power dynamics, and sociological explanations within primary, secondary, and higher education settings. The review excluded works that addressed gender more broadly without a clear focus on educational institutions. To achieve comprehensive coverage, materials were identified through academic databases, keyword searches, and manual review of reference lists from relevant studies. The timeframe was not restricted to a single decade because both classical and contemporary contributions were considered valuable in mapping the evolution of theoretical debates. Each source was critically examined with attention to its conceptual framework, methodological approach, and substantive findings. The review process sought to identify not only what theories explain but also how they converge or diverge in interpreting gender inequality in schools. Analysis proceeded through thematic categorization, grouping studies according to their theoretical orientation and the dimensions of inequality they emphasized. Key themes included the reproduction of social structures, the hidden curriculum, the construction of gender identities, and the intersections of gender with class and race. The method also involved evaluating the strengths and limitations of each theoretical tradition in addressing the persistence of inequality. The comparative aspect of the review enabled the

identification of patterns across different contexts and highlighted the adaptability of theories to diverse educational environments. The approach prioritized critical engagement rather than descriptive summary to ensure depth of interpretation. The process emphasized reflexivity by recognizing how theoretical choices influence the framing of gender issues in schools. The synthesis of findings was guided by an intention to build a more holistic understanding of power relations in education. The overall methodological orientation aimed to balance breadth of coverage with depth of analysis in order to capture the complexity of the subject matter. This design allowed for the integration of multiple perspectives while maintaining a coherent analytical framework. The outcome of the method is a structured synthesis that provides both clarity and critical insight into how sociological theories explain the persistence of gender inequality in educational institutions.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Functionalist Theory and the Masking of Inequality

Functionalist theory positions education as a central institution for transmitting societal norms and maintaining stability, yet this framework frequently masks underlying inequalities. The approach emphasizes consensus and cohesion, presenting schools as neutral spaces where meritocracy determines outcomes. In practice, educational systems under this perspective appear to reward effort and ability, but the structures simultaneously reinforce pre-existing gender hierarchies. Students often internalize the idea that differences in achievement reflect natural ability, even though these differences are shaped by gendered expectations and opportunities. The focus on uniformity and shared values obscures the fact that curricula and teaching methods often privilege male experiences. Functionalist reasoning highlights the integrative role of education, yet it overlooks how this integration sustains patriarchal power rather than challenging it. The assumption that schools provide equal chances for all creates a narrative that minimizes the visibility of systemic gender disparities. This perspective positions conformity as a social good, which pressures female students to adjust to norms that limit their agency. Schools appear to function as stabilizers of society, but they simultaneously distribute unequal roles and identities based on gender. By framing gender inequality as an individual issue rather than a structural one, functionalism diverts attention away from institutional accountability. The theory presents education as a space of fairness, yet the lived experiences of students reveal hidden mechanisms of bias. The framework assumes that order and discipline benefit everyone equally, but the burden of compliance often falls disproportionately on female students. This outlook prevents critical questioning of why inequalities persist in supposedly meritocratic environments. The notion of consensus also marginalizes voices that challenge traditional roles and expectations. As a result functionalist interpretations provide a limited understanding of how power operates within schools. The theory may succeed in explaining the maintenance of social order, but it fails to illuminate the processes through which gender inequality is normalized and perpetuated.

2. Conflict Theory and the Reproduction of Power Relations

Conflict theory views education as a site where inequalities are actively produced and reproduced to serve the interests of dominant groups. This perspective highlights that schools do not operate as neutral spaces but as institutions that legitimize existing power hierarchies. The curriculum often reflects the values and priorities of those in authority, ensuring that students internalize beliefs that sustain social stratification. Teachers and administrators exercise authority in ways that reinforce compliance and discourage resistance, particularly among marginalized groups. Gender inequality emerges through practices that channel male and female students into differentiated roles that align with societal expectations. Male students are frequently encouraged to pursue subjects and activities associated with leadership and

authority, while female students are steered toward supportive or domestic-oriented roles. Assessment systems reward conformity to dominant norms, which results in advantages for those already aligned with prevailing structures of power. Discipline policies often punish behaviors differently across genders, reinforcing traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity. Peer dynamics also reflect wider patterns of dominance, as boys often occupy central roles in social networks while girls are marginalized or silenced. Conflict theory underscores how these processes serve to reproduce rather than dismantle inequality, ensuring that schools contribute to the stability of hierarchical social arrangements. The system portrays itself as objective and meritocratic, yet the outcomes consistently favor those who already possess power. Students learn to accept their positions within the hierarchy, which perpetuates cycles of privilege and disadvantage. Educational institutions appear to prepare individuals for participation in the labor market, but they also condition students to accept unequal opportunities. Gendered patterns in subject selection, career guidance, and expectations mirror broader divisions of labor in society. The school thus becomes a microcosm of structural inequality, ensuring that gender disparities persist across generations. Conflict theory explains these dynamics by revealing how the reproduction of power relations in education secures the dominance of certain groups while limiting the mobility of others.

3. Feminist Theory and the Critique of Patriarchal Practices

Feminist theory positions education as a critical site where patriarchal structures are both reproduced and challenged, focusing on how schools operate as agents of gender socialization. The theory highlights that educational institutions often reinforce male dominance through hidden curricula that privilege masculine values and marginalize female perspectives. Teachers may unconsciously encourage male students to speak more, lead discussions, and dominate classroom space, while female students are subtly guided toward compliance and silence. Textbooks and curricular content frequently portray men as historical leaders and innovators, whereas women are represented in supportive or peripheral roles. Such practices shape students' understanding of gender roles, normalizing inequality and limiting female aspirations. Feminist analyses emphasize that school policies and disciplinary measures often uphold traditional gender norms that disadvantage girls. Uniform codes, behavioral expectations, and participation opportunities are frequently structured in ways that reinforce ideals of femininity and masculinity. Peer cultures also reflect patriarchal dynamics, with boys often receiving greater recognition for assertive behavior, while similar behavior in girls is criticized. Feminist theory underscores that education should not only transmit knowledge but also serve as a transformative space that empowers marginalized voices. The theory calls for inclusive pedagogy that validates female experiences and redefines authority in ways that disrupt gender hierarchies. Feminist critiques reveal that reform efforts which ignore patriarchal practices risk reproducing the inequalities they aim to reduce. The approach identifies how unequal access to leadership opportunities within schools mirrors broader patterns of gender inequality in society. It also emphasizes that the classroom can either reproduce dominant norms or become a site of resistance and empowerment depending on how educators approach pedagogy. Feminist perspectives argue that equality requires not only equal access but also structural changes that dismantle power relations embedded in education. This perspective makes visible the mechanisms through which patriarchal practices persist and highlights strategies for creating schools that promote equity.

4. Intersectionality and the Multiplicity of Disadvantage

Intersectionality provides a lens to understand how gender inequality in education intersects with race, class, culture, and other axes of identity to create layered forms of disadvantage. This perspective highlights that female students do not experience inequality in

uniform ways but encounter differentiated barriers depending on their social positions. Students from marginalized racial or ethnic groups often face compounded discrimination that affects their academic performance and participation in school life. Poverty intensifies these disadvantages, as limited resources constrain access to quality education and restrict opportunities for girls from low-income families. Language and cultural differences further marginalize students whose identities do not align with dominant norms in educational institutions. Intersectionality reveals that policies designed to address gender gaps can be ineffective if they ignore these overlapping factors. A single-focus approach that only measures enrollment fails to capture disparities in subject choice, achievement levels, and long-term career trajectories. Classroom dynamics demonstrate how stereotypes about both gender and ethnicity shape expectations from teachers and peers, which in turn influences student confidence and aspirations. Students who exist at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression often internalize messages of inferiority, reducing their likelihood of seeking leadership roles. Peer interactions may also reproduce these disadvantages, as girls from marginalized groups are more likely to be silenced or excluded. Intersectionality emphasizes that structural inequality cannot be dismantled without addressing the interconnected nature of discrimination. It also shows that reforms focusing narrowly on gender often benefit privileged groups of women while leaving others behind. Educational interventions that fail to recognize multiplicity risk perpetuating hidden inequalities within the system. Intersectional analysis points toward the need for differentiated strategies that are sensitive to the diverse realities of students' lives. Schools can only function as equitable institutions when they acknowledge and respond to the overlapping disadvantages experienced by students across gender, race, class, and culture. This finding highlights the transformative potential of adopting intersectionality as a guiding framework for understanding and addressing gender inequality in education.

5. Poststructuralism and the Construction of Gendered Subjectivities

Poststructuralist theory emphasizes that gender inequality in schools is reproduced through discourses, practices, and everyday interactions that construct and constrain student identities. This perspective highlights that power does not simply operate through overt structures but is embedded in subtle mechanisms such as language, discipline, and categorization. Classrooms often function as spaces where gendered subjectivities are continuously produced by the ways teachers address students, assign roles, and evaluate behavior. Discourses of masculinity and femininity shape expectations that students internalize, influencing how they perceive their own capacities and possibilities. Rules and routines within schools reinforce norms that privilege certain expressions of identity while silencing or delegitimizing others. Poststructuralist analysis reveals that authority is exercised not only through formal hierarchies but also through discursive practices that regulate what can be said and who can speak. Students learn to navigate these discourses by adopting identities that align with dominant norms, which sustains existing inequalities. Girls often experience pressure to embody ideals of compliance and modesty, while boys are encouraged to demonstrate assertiveness and control. These contrasting expectations normalize unequal distributions of power and position gender difference as natural rather than socially constructed. The subtle operation of these mechanisms makes them difficult to challenge, as they appear embedded in the ordinary routines of school life. Poststructuralist perspectives show that resistance is possible when students and teachers disrupt these discourses through alternative practices and counter-narratives. Classrooms can therefore serve as sites of both regulation and emancipation, depending on how discourses are enacted and contested. This finding demonstrates that gender inequality is not fixed but is continuously produced and reproduced through social interactions. The emphasis on discourse underscores that education is deeply implicated in shaping subjectivities that extend beyond the classroom into broader society.

Schools are thus not only transmitters of knowledge but also powerful spaces where identities are constructed in ways that sustain gendered hierarchies. Poststructuralist approaches ultimately highlight the importance of questioning everyday practices to expose the hidden workings of power in education.

This study's finding that functionalist theory masks underlying gender inequalities by framing schools as neutral meritocratic institutions aligns with critical sociological research that challenges the façade of cohesion perpetuated under the guise of social integration. Parsons's portrayal of schools as agents of consensus-making and value transmission downplays how such structures fail to account for systemic disparities (Parsons, 1959). Contemporary critiques argue that functionalism overlooks how institutional norms reproduce inequities, especially along gender lines, reinforcing rather than dismantling hierarchies (Ejeh, 2021). Empirical research from education in Uzbekistan reveals that teachers implement functionalist ideals unevenly, which exacerbates disparities by privileging those aligned with the dominant culture (Nargiza, Zhao, & Fazal, 2023). Other studies demonstrate how institutional emphasis on shared values and roles obscures the social dysfunction inherent in neglecting gendered experiences, thereby naturalizing male-centric norms (Cheung, 2017). Cross-national critiques indicate that when functionalist ideals are applied without critical reflexivity, reforms often replicate inequality instead of challenging it (Chalaune, 2023). The persistence of educational systems that appear neutral but sustain gendered power relations confirms the finding that functionalist interpretations provide an incomplete and potentially harmful understanding of educational equity. Taken together, these studies affirm that functionalist frameworks risk perpetuating paternalistic norms, stressing order at the cost of justice, and require integration with conflict-based and critical perspectives to address gender inequality meaningfully.

This study's finding that conflict theory highlights schools as arenas where dominant groups reproduce authority and perpetuate gender inequality is consistent with several strands of critical educational research. Bowles and Gintis (1976) argued that schools mirror capitalist labor hierarchies by conditioning students into unequal roles, a process that reinforces class and gender divisions. Recent research confirms that conflict-oriented perspectives expose how assessment systems and disciplinary practices disproportionately benefit male students and disadvantage female students (Bakker & Silvey, 2016). Comparative studies in South Asia reveal that power asymmetries in school structures reproduce patriarchal authority and institutionalize gendered expectations (Durrani, 2008). Analyses from Latin America show that hidden curricula normalize unequal gender roles and restrict opportunities for female students to access leadership pathways (Stromquist, 2015). Scholars further stress that conflict theory remains useful for analyzing how broader social inequalities are reproduced in classrooms, particularly when linked with critical feminist and intersectional approaches (Apple, 2013). The convergence of these studies with the present finding reinforces the argument that schools are not neutral spaces but key institutions where inequalities are systematically maintained. The divergence lies in the scope of emphasis, as some research prioritizes class reproduction while others place stronger focus on gender dynamics. The overall body of evidence confirms that conflict theory provides a robust framework for exposing the mechanisms by which education sustains unequal distributions of power.

This study's finding that feminist theory exposes how education reinforces patriarchal practices resonates strongly with previous scholarship that documents the gendered nature of schooling. Weiner (1994) showed that curricula and pedagogy are structured in ways that normalize male dominance and marginalize female voices. Arnot and Mac an Ghail (2006) argued that feminist perspectives highlight the necessity of examining classroom power relations to uncover how gender inequalities are reproduced daily. Stromquist (2013) emphasized that girls' experiences in education are shaped not only by access but also by the

quality of interactions, which often reinforce subordination through hidden curricula. Francis and Skelton (2005) observed that female students continue to encounter systemic barriers to leadership within schools, reflecting broader patriarchal structures in society. Acker (1994) added that teacher expectations and institutional norms systematically disadvantage women, perpetuating a cycle of limited aspirations and opportunities. Research in African contexts further confirms that patriarchal traditions embedded in educational institutions hinder gender equality despite formal policy commitments (Morley, 2010). Evidence from Scandinavian schools shows that even in societies with progressive gender policies, hidden practices sustain unequal participation rates among girls and boys (Holm & Liinason, 2005). Field evidence suggests that schools' readiness for technological transformation mediates gendered access and outcomes. Limitations in institutional capacity especially in adapting to Society 5.0 requirement sexacerbate disparities in schooling experiences (Hikmat, 2022). The varied effectiveness of online learning across course types underscores how structural preparedness influences whose learning thrives (Hikmat et al., 2020). These studies collectively confirm that feminist analysis remains indispensable for uncovering the mechanisms through which education both mirrors and reproduces patriarchal relations. Divergences among the literature mainly relate to cultural context, but the overall consensus aligns with the present finding that schools play a central role in sustaining patriarchal practices.

This study's finding that intersectionality reveals how gender inequality intersects with race, class, and culture to create layered disadvantages reflects a growing body of educational research. Crenshaw (1991) first articulated intersectionality as a framework to understand how overlapping identities shape experiences of oppression, and her insights have been widely applied in education. Collins and Bilge (2016) emphasized that examining multiple dimensions of inequality is necessary to capture the complex realities of students' lives. Research in the United States showed that minority girls face both racial and gender discrimination that limits their academic participation and long-term outcomes (Joseph et al., 2016). Studies in the United Kingdom confirmed that socioeconomic status and ethnicity interact with gender to determine educational access and achievement gaps (Gillborn, 2015). Intersectional analysis in South African schools revealed that cultural and linguistic differences amplify the exclusion of female students from marginalized communities (Khoja-Moolji, 2015). Empirical work in Canada indicated that immigrant girls confront unique challenges where gendered expectations overlap with cultural norms and economic barriers (Abada & Tenkorang, 2009). Scholars stress that intersectionality advances understanding beyond single-axis approaches that treat gender or class in isolation. Comparative studies show that interventions targeting gender equality often disproportionately benefit privileged groups of women, leaving disadvantaged populations further behind (Staunæs, 2003). Evidence consistently supports the idea that educational inequality must be analyzed through intersecting social categories rather than through one-dimensional frameworks. The convergence of these studies with the present finding confirms that intersectionality provides a critical lens for developing inclusive and context-sensitive policies.

This study's finding that poststructuralist theory exposes how discourses and everyday practices construct gendered subjectivities in schools aligns with extensive research that emphasizes the subtle workings of power in education. Foucault (1980) argued that power operates through discourse and discipline rather than only through visible hierarchies, and this idea has been foundational for poststructuralist analyses in schooling. Davies (2003) showed how young children internalize gendered subject positions through daily classroom interactions, demonstrating the pervasive influence of discursive practices. Francis (2006) highlighted that discourses of masculinity and femininity regulate student behavior and shape aspirations in ways that sustain inequality. Walkerdine (1990) revealed that teaching practices often reproduce traditional gender roles by positioning boys as rational and authoritative while

casting girls as emotional and subordinate. Ball (2013) explained that educational policy itself operates as discourse, shaping the possibilities for gender identity formation and constraining resistance. Yates (1997) found that poststructuralist perspectives uncover contradictions in schooling where students both reproduce and resist gender norms simultaneously. Studies in Scandinavian contexts confirmed that discourse analysis provides a powerful lens to explain why gendered patterns persist even in societies with strong commitments to equality (Liinason, 2018). These findings converge on the idea that power circulates in complex and subtle ways within schools, making gender inequality less visible yet deeply entrenched. Divergences emerge in terms of emphasis, as some research prioritizes early childhood education while others focus on higher education or policy frameworks. The overall body of literature supports the present finding that poststructuralism offers critical tools for exposing how identities are continuously shaped by discourse and power in educational settings.

D. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that sociological theories provide powerful tools for understanding how gender inequality is reproduced and contested in educational institutions. The analysis shows that functionalist theory presents education as a cohesive and integrative system, yet this interpretation masks systemic disparities that continue to disadvantage female students. Conflict theory reveals how schools serve as arenas for reproducing power relations, highlighting the mechanisms through which dominant groups secure their authority across generations. Feminist perspectives expose the hidden curriculum and pedagogical practices that perpetuate patriarchal norms while simultaneously emphasizing the potential for transformative approaches. Intersectionality demonstrates that gender inequality cannot be analyzed in isolation because it is intertwined with race, class, and cultural factors that generate multiple and overlapping disadvantages. Poststructuralist perspectives illuminate how discourses and everyday practices construct subjectivities that constrain identities and reinforce inequality in subtle ways. The findings collectively highlight that schools are not neutral spaces but critical institutions where power is exercised and normalized. Education emerges as both a site of reproduction and a site of resistance, depending on how theoretical perspectives are applied in practice. The study emphasizes that addressing inequality requires a synthesis of different sociological approaches to capture the complexity of educational dynamics. Policymakers and practitioners must recognize that reforms will remain limited if they do not confront the deeper structures of power embedded in schools. Teachers and administrators play central roles in shaping outcomes by either reinforcing or challenging gendered norms. Students themselves also navigate these dynamics by resisting, negotiating, or internalizing expectations imposed upon them. The conclusion stresses that meaningful change depends on a critical awareness of how theory informs practice and how practice reshapes theory. Future research should continue to bridge theoretical insights with empirical analysis to design interventions that are both context-sensitive and transformative. Educational institutions need to prioritize inclusive pedagogy that validates diverse identities and fosters equitable opportunities for all learners. Achieving gender equality in education is not only a matter of access but also of dismantling hidden mechanisms of exclusion. The study demonstrates that theories are not merely abstract frameworks but practical tools that can inspire policies and practices for justice. Schools can become spaces of empowerment when power relations are questioned, and alternative discourses are created. The findings confirm that lasting equity in education requires continuous critical engagement with the interplay of gender, power, and learning.

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