Inclusion of Gender-Diverse Students in Higher Education: Institutional Preparedness and Policy–Practice Gaps in Kerala

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Abstract

This study examines institutional preparedness for the inclusion of gender-diverse students in higher education in Kerala, with particular focus on the gap between policy commitments and everyday institutional practices. Drawing on a qualitative research design, data were collected through Right to Information (RTI) responses, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and institutional observations and document analysis. The findings indicate a significant gap between policy commitments and institutional practices. Institutional preparedness remains inadequate across key domains, including administrative procedures, infrastructure, support systems, and curricular practices. Inclusion within the academic community is shaped by socio-cultural attitudes, interpersonal interactions, and institutional cultures, often characterised by stigma, conditional acceptance, and the persistence of binary gender norms. The analysis points to the need to move beyond formal compliance towards sustained institutional engagement with structural, cultural, and pedagogical dimensions of inclusion. By situating these dynamics within the Kerala context, the study contributes to a grounded understanding of how gender inclusion is negotiated within higher education in India.

Introduction

Gender inclusion in higher education has become a significant concern across global education systems. Inclusion, in this context, extends beyond formal access to encompass equitable participation, supportive institutional practices, and campus environments that enable all students to learn with dignity and a sense of belonging. Despite the expansion of higher education, gender diverse learners continue to encounter exclusion, discrimination, and unsafe learning conditions that limit their participation and overall academic experience. There remains a marked disparity between commitments to inclusive practices and their implementation within institutions.

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In India, the question of transgender inclusion gained constitutional recognition through the landmark judgement in the *National Legal Services Authority V Union of India*, which affirmed the right to self-identify one's gender and recognised transgender persons as a distinct category entitled to equality, dignity, and protection under the law. This was followed by the enactment of the *Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019*, which places explicit responsibility on educational institutions to ensure non-discrimination and inclusive access. However, the existence of legal and policy frameworks has not automatically translated into inclusive institutional practices. As increasing numbers of gender-diverse students enter higher education, questions of recognition, safety, participation, and everyday interaction have gained prominence.

Kerala provides an important context for examining these dynamics. The state is often associated with relatively progressive social indicators and was the first in India to adopt a dedicated transgender policy in 2015. The transgender rights movement in Kerala, supported by community-based activism, played a major role in shaping these policy changes (Mallapur, 2017). The Kerala State Transgender Policy 2015 marked a shift towards a rights-based approach by recognising transgender persons as citizens entitled to dignity, access, and participation. The need for such policy intervention was underscored by the State Transgender Survey (2014–15), which estimated a transgender population of approximately 25,000 in Kerala and reported that a significant proportion had discontinued education before completing secondary schooling.

Subsequent initiatives in Kerala have included educational scholarships, financial assistance for accommodation, and reservation measures in higher education, alongside efforts shaped by sustained community-based activism. While these developments indicate a progressive policy environment, they also raise critical questions about how they translate into institutional practice within colleges and universities. Although existing research has examined transgender rights and access to education in India, limited attention has been paid to how institutional structures and everyday practices within higher education shape experiences of inclusion. There is therefore a need to understand how policies are interpreted, implemented, and negotiated within institutional settings.

Against this backdrop, this study examines institutional preparedness for the inclusion of gender-diverse students in higher education in Kerala, with particular attention to the gap between policy commitments and everyday institutional practices. Drawing on qualitative data from multiple institutional actors, the study explores how administrative processes, campus environments, and socio-cultural attitudes shape access, participation, and recognition. The study also aims to go beyond policy analysis and investigate the processes that lead to inclusion.

Defining Gender Diversity and Scope of the Study

This study uses the term "gender-diverse students" to refer to individuals whose gender identity or expression differs from the sex assigned at birth. This broader framing extends beyond the legal category of "transgender" to include non-binary, gender-fluid,

and other gender-diverse identities. It enables an examination of inclusion as a social and institutional process rather than a narrowly defined legal status.

In this study, institutional preparedness is understood as the capacity of higher education institutions to support gender-diverse students across infrastructure, administrative systems, pedagogical practices, and campus climate. This conceptual framing allows for an assessment of how inclusion is structured, experienced, and enacted within institutional settings**.** Higher education institutions engage with many of these individuals but do not always fully recognise them within formal policy structures.

Situating the Study within Existing Literature

Inclusive education refers to the capacity of educational systems to ensure the participation and success of all learners. UNESCO (2017) emphasises that this requires institutions to create environments responsive to diverse learning and social needs. In India, the *Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019*, reinforces this commitment by mandating non-discriminatory educational environments for transgender persons. Section 2(d) of the Act further defines inclusive education as a system in which transgender students can learn alongside others without fear of discrimination, neglect, or harassment.

International research consistently documents the challenges faced by transgender and gender-diverse students in higher education, particularly experiences of discrimination, harassment, and inadequate institutional support, all of which negatively affect retention and well-being. Evidence from large-scale studies, including findings reported by Goldberg (2018), indicates that transgender students frequently experience campus-based harassment, with some discontinuing their studies. Similarly, Schneider (2010) highlights that limited institutional support and inaccessible environments contribute significantly to exclusion.

Research from India remains limited but points to similar structural and cultural barriers. Existing studies suggest that access to higher education does not necessarily translate into inclusive participation, as universities and colleges often remain inadequately equipped to address gender diversity (Chakraborty & Bose, 2022; Misra, 2018). Students report experiences of misrecognition, exclusion, and limited support, while faculty members and administrators often lack awareness of gender diversity. Curricular content also continues to reinforce binary understandings of gender, further marginalising non-conforming identities (Yadava & Bhattacharjee, 2022; Sunny & Deb, 2021).

India's higher education system is currently undergoing significant transformation, with policy frameworks such as the National Education Policy 2020 and guidelines issued by the University Grants Commission placing increasing emphasis on equity and inclusion. However, how gender inclusion is understood and addressed within higher education institutions remains under-examined in both research and policy evaluation. While legal and policy measures exist, there is a limited understanding of how these are translated

into everyday institutional practices. This study addresses this gap by examining institutional preparedness and campus-level experiences of inclusion, contributing to a grounded understanding of gender-diverse inclusion in higher education.

Research Design and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine institutional preparedness for transgender inclusion and how gender inclusion is understood and enacted within higher education institutions in Kerala. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate for capturing the complexity of institutional practices and participants' perspectives in academic settings. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who are directly engaged with higher education institutions. The participants included administrators, faculty members, non-teaching staff, and students, enabling the study to capture multiple perspectives across institutional roles.

Data were collected using multiple methods to ensure depth and triangulation:

RTI Data: A Right to Information (RTI) application was filed with the Directorate of Collegiate Education, Kerala. Responses were received from 119 colleges and eight universities, providing institution-level data on enrolment and related administrative aspects.

In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three college principals, eight faculty members, and seven non-teaching staff to understand institutional practices, perceptions, and challenges related to transgender inclusion.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): One FGD with faculty members and three FGDs with students were conducted to explore shared experiences, attitudes, and interactions within campus spaces.

Observation and Document Analysis: Campus visits were undertaken to observe institutional environments, and relevant documents, including policies, records, and reports, were reviewed to contextualise findings.

All interviews and discussions were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis**.** This approach enabled the identification of recurring patterns and themes emerging from the data. The analysis was informed by interpretive perspectives on gender, institutional practices, and social attitudes, allowing for a contextual understanding of inclusion within higher education. Triangulation across data sources was used to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings.

Ethical considerations were strictly followed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained in the reporting of findings.

Limitations

This study focuses on institutional responses and perspectives within higher education settings where transgender students are visibly present. As a result, it does not capture contexts where individuals have not disclosed their gender identity or remain outside institutional recognition. The analysis is further limited to arts and science colleges in Kerala, as other sectors of higher education reported limited or no enrolment of transgender students during the data collection period.

Findings of the Study

This section presents a thematic analysis of data collected through Right to Information (RTI) responses, institutional site visits, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. The findings are organised into two interrelated domains: institutional preparedness for transgender inclusion and socio-cultural and institutional dynamics of inclusion within the academic community.

Part 1: Institutional Preparedness for Transgender Inclusion

This section examines the extent of institutional preparedness for transgender inclusion within higher education. It focuses on structural and administrative dimensions, including enrolment patterns, policy frameworks, infrastructure, support systems, and access to academic and co-curricular spaces. The findings highlight how institutions translate policy commitments into practice through formal arrangements, resources, and initiatives aimed at supporting transgender students.

Enrolment Patterns and Retention within Institutions

In 2018, the Government of Kerala introduced a policy reserving two additional seats for transgender applicants in state universities and affiliated arts and science colleges, following advocacy by the State Transgender Justice Board. This has functioned as a critical entry mechanism for students who had previously disengaged from formal education (Kerala Higher Education Department, 2018). The policy is consistent with the direction of the Supreme Court in the *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India (2014)* judgement, which explicitly identified discrimination in education as a major structural barrier facing transgender persons and directed state governments to extend reservation benefits to the community in educational institutions. For many students in this study, the reservation provision not only created a practical entry point but also rendered their gender identity visible within institutional spaces that had previously failed to acknowledge it.

Responses were received from 119 colleges and eight universities; however, only four universities and seven colleges reported the presence of transgender students. Further, information obtained through an RTI application shows that between 2017–18 and 2020–21, a total of 39 transgender students were enrolled in arts and science programmes across four universities. However, more recent observations reveal that this trend has not significantly improved, with many individuals continuing to conceal their gender

identity due to persistent stigma, discrimination, and fear of exclusion. Despite the impression created by this number indicating an increase in higher education access, disparities continue to exist, and the distribution is not evenly spread out across the regions but tends to be clustered. The majority of students are attending educational facilities based in urban areas that tend to be more liberal. Within the transgender community, internal hierarchies of visibility and marginalisation are evident. While transgender identities have gained increasing public visibility in recent years, this visibility is largely centred on trans women, leaving trans men relatively invisible and under-represented in both discourse and institutional recognition. Most students were concentrated in undergraduate programmes, particularly within the humanities and social sciences, which may be linked to constraints in accessing professional or technical courses, as noted in some participant accounts.

Retention of students in higher education institutions was still an issue. While most students remained enrolled in their programmes during the study period, a proportion withdrew or transferred, with indications that completion and degree attainment remained relatively low. Factors contributing to dropout rates included the pressing need for jobs, treatments in relation to gender reassignment procedures, and even disinterest arising from unsupportive institutional settings.

Institutional Policies and Administrative Frameworks

The study found that a large majority (98 per cent) of the institutions had not updated their internal policies to address transgender inclusion. In many cases, institutions justified this absence by claiming that existing policies were sufficient to address the needs of all students. General policy frameworks often exclude transgender students when institutions fail to acknowledge their specific barriers and needs.

The gap between policy and practice was particularly visible in the communication system between universities and affiliated colleges. In one case, a university had formulated a transgender inclusion policy, but affiliated colleges were unaware of it. Similarly, although the state had introduced additional seats for transgender candidates, most institutions were unaware of the reservation policy. Many colleges also lacked clarity about the documents required during admission, which led students to be asked for medical certificates, income proofs, or letters from the Social Justice Department.

Admission forms remained strongly binary. Only a small proportion of institutions had included a transgender option in their forms, and most were unaware that such an option was required or available. At the postgraduate level, forms continued to offer only male and female categories, which meant that transgender students were once again forced to select categories that did not reflect their identity. The problem did not end with admission. Service-related documents such as examination applications, fee challans, and participation forms also remained binary in most institutions.

Campus Infrastructure and Accessibility

The physical environment of the institutions remained largely binary. Gender-inclusive toilets and suitable hostel arrangements were rare. In one case, a designated toilet was available but so poorly maintained that students avoided it. In another institution, a staff toilet was later repurposed as transgender-friendly after a student made a specific request. A similar ad hoc response was seen when a student was shifted to a teachers' hostel with an adjusted fee structure. While such arrangements may have provided immediate safety, they also created separation from the wider student community. Institutional reluctance to make infrastructural changes was often justified in financial terms. One faculty member remarked:

> *"As the number of transgender students is very low, it is considered financially unfeasible for the university to modify infrastructure for them. The higher authorities are described as helpless and unable to take action."*

The result is that transgender students are made to fit into existing spaces rather than institutions being redesigned to include them.

Campus Resources and Support Systems

Support systems were reported to be uneven and often dependent on individual staff members rather than structured institutional arrangements. Only a small proportion of respondents (approximately one-third) described their institutions as transgender-friendly, while most identified more broadly as student-friendly. In some cases, institutions highlighted general campus culture and participation opportunities as supportive of transgender students. For instance, a faculty member from a government college noted:

> *"Any marginalised section can thrive on this campus... We provide opportunities for transgender students to participate actively, particularly in campus events."*

While mentoring through class tutors was available, it did not always result in sustained engagement with transgender students. Some tutors reported limited time to interact with students or hesitation in addressing gender-related concerns.

One tutor shared an instance where raising concerns about a student's class attendance led to a strong reaction, after which further interaction did not continue. In several cases, responsibility for student support informally shifted to female staff members. However, they also reported constraints due to teaching responsibilities and administrative workload.

As one faculty member noted:

> *"If we go and enquire about the issues of each student, it will complicate our jobs... We do not get time to meet students after teaching hours."*

None of the institutions had a dedicated support cell for transgender students. Grievances were handled through general bodies such as the Board of Adjudication of Students' Grievances, which were not designed to address gender-specific issues. The study also found that institutions often minimised complaints of bullying or ragging and, in some cases, shifted responsibility onto the students themselves. The absence of a sensitive redressal mechanism leaves transgender students without a clear pathway for protection.

Access to Co-curricular Activities and Campus Participation

Participation in co-curricular activities uncovered yet another dimension of difficulty. Regarding sports and arts participation, institutions often acknowledged transgender students but rarely ensured their active involvement.

A few isolated efforts were reported, such as the introduction of separate gender categories in youth festival forms. However, these were described as limited and not uniformly implemented across institutions. A transgender student noted that the formation of a special category might simply result in making it "a category of one" and thus complicate rather than simplify participation. While some universities have taken steps to promote more inclusive participation in competitive activities, existing guidelines continue to restrict transgender students' involvement in programmes such as the National Cadet Corps (NCC) and National Service Scheme (NSS).

Political participation emerged as one of the more visible spaces of inclusion. Some transgender students successfully contested and won student union elections, demonstrating that they could participate not only as beneficiaries of policy but also as active leaders in campus life. However, the fact that these instances were viewed as exceptional rather than routine highlights the continued limitations in broader political inclusion and representation within higher education spaces.

Curriculum, Classroom Practices, and Sensitisation

Some faculties noted challenges in teaching topics that are traditionally framed within male–female classifications, especially in subjects such as statistics. At the same time, a few academic programmes had begun incorporating themes related to gender and transgender identities into the curriculum, including courses focused on gender politics. Faculty members involved in these revisions described their role in connecting academic content with student experiences.

However, some respondents indicated that institutions often confined awareness-related efforts to specific programmes or activities instead of integrating them into routine academic practices. As one faculty member noted:

> *"Although the work of community-based organisations is commendable, it focuses only on the community. We still have an 'us and them' feeling about their issues. We feel that this problem only affects a particular section, and we can do nothing about their issues. We need to reconsider what kind of inclusion is required."*

Part 2: Socio-Cultural and Institutional Dynamics of Transgender Inclusion

This section examines how transgender inclusion is shaped and experienced within everyday academic life through institutional practices, social interactions, and campus culture. While institutional policies and provisions create a formal framework for inclusion, the actual experience of transgender students is shaped by interactions with peers, teachers, and the broader campus environment. The findings highlight how students, faculty, and institutions negotiate inclusion through daily practices, relationships, and informal institutional cultures.

Socio-cultural Attitudes and Challenges of Acceptance

Participants highlighted how families, peers, and wider society shape attitudes toward transgender persons. Family members often cautioned cisgender female students against forming close relationships with transgender students. One student explained:

> *"When we say that transgender persons are studying in our class, some people warn us, saying, 'Do not befriend them. Their friendship will affect you, and others will speak badly about you because of it.' This is the mindset of people around us. Such advice can come from friends, seniors, brothers, or anyone in society."*

Some participants also reported hesitation in disclosing the presence of transgender classmates to family members due to anticipated negative reactions. Others noted that, in certain contexts, gender diversity was interpreted within families as a form of illness. Media, particularly television, were also described as influencing perceptions. As one student noted:

> *"Television shows can also harm our families. If you come from a conservative family background and enter an educational institution with a narrow mindset, you cannot accept a transgender classmate."*

These accounts indicate that students' interactions within the campus are shaped by prior social influences, including family attitudes, peer networks, and media representations.

Participants also described differing institutional approaches toward transgender inclusion. In some cases, transgender students were treated in the same manner as other students, without specific attention to their needs. In other instances, respondents indicated that institutions tended to wait for formal directions before initiating inclusion-related measures.

Stigma, Prejudice, and Conditional Forms of Acceptance

While some institutions described themselves as supportive, participants' accounts indicated that inclusion was often conditional. In certain contexts, the presence of transgender students was treated as requiring special attention, particularly in managing interactions with other students. Some staff members reported the need to caution other students against inappropriate behaviour.

Cisgender students and some staff members also expressed hesitation in fully accepting transgender peers. Acceptance was often described as dependent on the student's conduct, appearance, and visibility in public spaces. One student explained how his attitude changed after encountering a transgender classmate outside the college setting:

> *"I accepted this change... [but] one night I saw my transgender classmate walking through the city streets... I felt bad seeing him at night with a transgender group. After that incident, I found it extremely difficult to get along with the student."*

A faculty member similarly noted that non-acceptance was influenced by broader social attitudes, with some staff expressing discomfort when transgender students interacted with transgender communities outside the classroom.

Peer responses within the classroom also reflected hesitation. One student described the reaction of classmates when a transgender student was admitted:

> *"When we were informed about the admission of a transgender student in our class, two of the girls expressed concern. They said, 'Ayyo! Ingane ullathoke classil vannal engana?' (Translation: 'Gosh! How would it be if such people came to study in our class?'). Those girls were unwilling to interact with the transgender student. I defended the student by asking why they should be blamed for their situation. What exactly is their fault?"*

Participants also described differences in how transgender identities were perceived. In some cases, students considered certain transgender individuals more "acceptable" than others based on their appearance and behaviour. One student explained:

> *"The transgender students on our campus looked nothing like those we usually see... Our transgender classmate is bold and stylish. She is well-dressed... They should try to behave normally."*

Some staff members also linked acceptance to the way transgender students presented themselves and interacted within the campus environment.

Recognition and Validation of Transgender Identities

Participants described the difficulties students and staff experienced in recognising transgender identities as valid and legitimate. Even when transgender students used their preferred names and openly identified with a particular gender, peers did not always fully acknowledge these identities. One cisgender student explained that despite sharing accommodation, travelling together, and interacting closely with a transmasculine classmate, she continued to perceive the classmate as female. At the same time, she acknowledged that these interactions helped her develop a greater awareness and understanding of transmasculine identities, even though her personal perception of gender remained unchanged.

Faculty and administrative responses reflected similar patterns. One department head described engaging with a transmasculine student's identity through a biological lens:

> *"I was curious about the student because she is a girl who wants to be identified as a boy. I asked the student, 'Will she get pregnant if someone rapes her?' The student said, 'Yes!' and then I asked her, 'So, you are a girl, right?' The student said, 'No!' I will not marry, but I will give birth to a baby, and the baby will call me 'Dad'. He wanted to be a father to a child, not a mother."*

A non-teaching staff member also described linking recognition to visible changes:

> *"Men are usually very bold, but this student behaves like a girl. For example, when we publish results on the notice board, he complains like the girls do. Initially, it was difficult for us to see the student differently. However, the student is now undergoing treatment, and we are trying to accept the change."*

Participants' accounts also highlighted classroom practices related to recognition. Pronouns and names were not always used consistently, and some respondents noted that earlier names continued to be used in certain instances.

At the same time, some faculty members reported efforts to adopt more inclusive practices. One teacher explained:

> *"We have been calling them by their new name since the first day. We address them based on how they present themselves to us."*

Another faculty member described changes in classroom language:

> *'In meetings, we usually address students as "vidyarthi-vidyarthinikale" (male & female students), but I now instruct others to use "vidyarthikale" (the unisex term for students). Otherwise, transgender students will stand out."*

Some faculty members also reported difficulties in engaging with language and content that move beyond binary gender categories, particularly in subjects such as statistics.

Pathologisation and Medicalised Understandings of Gender Identity

Several participants described the persistence of views that interpret gender diversity through a medical or psychological lens. In these accounts, participants often interpreted transgender identities as forms of disorder or behavioural deviation.

One faculty member noted that such perspectives were present even among educated staff:

> *"The root of the issue lies in societal attitudes... They are often treated as having a psychological disorder rather than being understood in terms of their orientation.*

Some faculty members in our department even believe that issues related to gender identity can be 'corrected' through harsh punishment."

Participants also referred to similar perceptions within family contexts. Some students reported that parents often viewed transgender identities as a form of "mental illness", which negatively affected their relationships within the family and, in some cases, also influenced how peers interacted with them on campus.

Allyship, Support, and Institutional Silence

Despite the challenges reported, some participants described changes in attitudes through direct interaction. One cisgender student noted that her perceptions shifted after developing a friendship with a transgender peer and participating in pride marches. She explained:

"...once I was able to engage with them directly, I found no difficulty in doing so."

Moreover, many participants highlighted that the reactions of teaching staff were often hesitant. They did not openly express their stance on transgender acceptance in their personal interactions. In some cases, institutions justified these actions as necessary to protect the institution's image and avoid complaints.

Participants also noted that some male faculty members were more likely to display such responses. Although several institutions projected an image of transgender inclusion, underlying attitudes often remained unchanged.

Discussion

The analysis reveals that the policy–practice gap operates across multiple interconnected domains, including institutional structures, socio-cultural attitudes, processes of recognition, and forms of participation within academic spaces.

Institutional Preparedness and the Policy–Practice Gap

The findings reveal a clear gap between formal policy commitments and institutional realities, indicating that inclusion remains incomplete despite the presence of progressive legal frameworks. Administrative procedures, institutional records, and campus facilities continue to operate within binary gender assumptions, limiting the recognition of gender diversity. These practices reflect the persistence of institutional cisnormativity, wherein organisational systems are structured around the expectation of only two genders. Recent research has emphasised that such institutional arrangements are not neutral but actively produce exclusionary environments (Horton, 2023). In this study, transgender students were often required to adapt to systems that did not acknowledge their identities.

The persistence of a policy–practice gap emerges as a central concern. In Kerala, institutional approaches to transgender inclusion are shaped by the interaction between state-level policy initiatives and national legal frameworks. However, the findings indicate that these provisions have not been consistently translated into institutional practice. Several institutions demonstrated limited awareness of policy measures, uncertainty about documentation requirements, and a reliance on general grievance mechanisms rather than gender-sensitive support systems.

Research in the Indian context (Yadava & Bhattacharjee, 2022; Sunny & Deb, 2021) similarly points to institutional unpreparedness and low levels of awareness as key barriers to effective inclusion. In this study, these gaps were reflected not only in administrative procedures but also in the absence of clear operational guidelines and dedicated support structures. This suggests that formal policy intent alone is insufficient to ensure effective implementation, which is instead shaped by institutional capacity, procedural clarity, and administrative engagement.

Socio-cultural Conditions Shaping Inclusion and Exclusion

The findings demonstrate that socio-cultural attitudes within academic spaces mediate inclusion. Acceptance of transgender students was often conditional and shaped by expectations of conformity to dominant gender norms. This reflects a form of conditional inclusion, where recognition is granted selectively rather than as a matter of right. Inclusion, in this sense, is contingent upon adherence to socially accepted norms rather than grounded in institutional guarantees. This pattern of conditional acceptance is often underpinned by deeper affective responses, including what Hill and Willoughby (2005, p. 533) describe as "emotional disgust toward individuals who do not conform to society's gender expectations", which continues to influence interpersonal interactions within academic spaces.

Influences beyond the campus further reinforce these dynamics. Family attitudes, peer networks, and media representations play a significant role in shaping perceptions of gender diversity. Participants described being warned against forming friendships with transgender peers and noted that gender diversity is often framed as a form of illness within family contexts. These findings indicate that higher education institutions in Kerala operate within a broader social environment where stigma is reproduced through everyday interactions and cultural narratives. Institutions, therefore, do not function in isolation but remain embedded within wider social systems that sustain exclusion.

Recognition and Validation of Gender Identity in Institutional Practices

Another significant finding relates to the limited recognition and validation of transgender identities. Misuse of pronouns, reliance on biological frameworks, and expectations of medical transition reflect the persistence of medicalised understandings of gender. These practices stand in contrast to the legal framework established by the NALSA judgement, which affirms self-identification without requiring medical validation. Recent studies has similarly critiqued the persistence of medical gatekeeping in institutional contexts,

noting its role in limiting recognition and reinforcing exclusion (Dutta & Roy, 2022; Ashley, 2019). Recent developments, including the *Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Act, 2026*, indicate shifts in the legal framework governing transgender rights in India. The move towards medical verification of identity has raised concerns about the erosion of self-identification as a principle of recognition.

The study also draws attention to internal disparities within the transgender community, particularly the relative invisibility of transmen students. Individuals assigned female at birth who identify as men often remain under-represented within institutional spaces. As noted by Petreena (2023), trans men experience a form of double marginalisation shaped by patriarchal gender norms and gender non-conformity, which helps explain their limited visibility and the lack of institutional recognition observed in this study.

The inadequacy of institutional support systems further illustrates this gap. Where mentorship and support were available, they depended largely on individual faculty members rather than structured institutional mechanisms. In the absence of dedicated transgender support systems, student concerns were often routed through general grievance bodies that were not equipped to address gender-specific issues. This reflects what Siegel (2019) describes as institutional "microclimates", where support is uneven and dependent on isolated pockets of goodwill, resulting in precarious forms of inclusion.

Participation and Negotiation in Constrained Institutional Spaces

The findings indicate that transgender students are not merely passive recipients of institutional policies but active participants in shaping their educational experiences. In some universities and colleges, opportunities for transgender inclusion have been introduced in both curricular and co-curricular domains such as student union elections, classroom discussions, and cultural or youth festivals. These forms of participation reflect emerging institutional openings that enable visibility and involvement. However, these opportunities remain unevenly implemented and are embedded within organisational structures that continue to privilege binary gender norms.

Despite increased access, participation is often negotiated within constrained institutional frameworks. Spaces such as sports, NSS, and NCC continue to operate through rigid gender binaries, limiting inclusion. In such contexts, students are required either to conform to predefined categories or withdraw, restricting the exercise of self-determination. The case of *National Cadet Corps & Ors. v. Hina Haneefa & Ors.* is significant, as it affirmed the right of a transgender woman to enrol in the NCC under the female category. This judgement illustrates how judicial intervention can challenge institutional rigidity and expand participation when administrative systems fail to accommodate self-identified gender. However, the reliance on such external mechanisms underscores the limits of institutional responsiveness and the conditional nature of inclusion.

At the level of everyday institutional practice, inclusion is shaped through micro-level interactions. Faculty members who used inclusive language, integrated gender diversity into the curriculum, and demonstrated respectful engagement contributed to more enabling classroom environments. Peer interactions also facilitated emerging forms of allyship, indicating that attitudes can shift through sustained engagement. However, these processes remain fragmented and dependent on individual initiative rather than being structurally embedded.

Conclusion

This study examined institutional preparedness for gender inclusion and how higher education institutions in Kerala understand and negotiate inclusion. The findings highlight a clear gap between policy commitments and their translation into institutional practice. While existing legal and policy frameworks have enabled formal access and recognition, their implementation within institutional structures remains incomplete.

Institutional preparedness was limited across several domains, including administrative procedures, infrastructure, support systems, and curricular practices. Many institutional processes continue to operate within binary assumptions about gender, with limited adaptation to the needs of gender-diverse students. Where supportive practices were observed, they were often informal and dependent on individual initiative rather than embedded within institutional frameworks, resulting in inconsistent and fragmented responses to inclusion.

The study also shows that inclusion within higher education is shaped not only by institutional arrangements but also by socio-cultural attitudes within the academic community. Broader social norms influenced perceptions of gender diversity, which often manifested as stigma, conditional acceptance, and expectations of conformity. These dynamics indicate that inclusion is not a fixed institutional outcome but an ongoing process negotiated through everyday interactions and institutional cultures.

The study points to the need for a shift from policy-driven access to sustained institutional engagement with the structural, cultural, and pedagogical dimensions of inclusion. This includes revisiting administrative procedures, strengthening support systems, integrating inclusive approaches within curricula, and fostering institutional environments that move beyond binary frameworks. Instances of inclusive practices, such as shifts in classroom language and emerging forms of engagement, suggest that institutional change is possible. However, such efforts remain limited in scope and cannot substitute for systematic institutional commitment. This study contributes to a context-specific understanding of gender inclusion in higher education and highlights the importance of aligning institutional practices with broader commitments to equity and inclusion.

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