Awareness of Gender Equality Policies, Laws and Acts in India: A Study among Students in Higher Education Institutions Tamil Nadu

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Received:Sep 30, 2026 Accepted:Oct 27, 2026 Published:Oct 28, 2026

Abstract

Legal awareness is an important component of gender equality, enabling individuals to recognise their rights and understand the protections available under constitutional provisions, legislation, policies, and government schemes. This study examines university students' awareness of selected gender equality laws and policies in Tamil Nadu, India. A quantitative, cross-sectional, descriptive and analytical research design was adopted using primary data collected through a structured interview schedule from 429 postgraduate students across seven selected universities. Students' self-reported awareness of ten legal and policy instruments was assessed using three response categories: aware, partially aware, and not aware. Frequencies, percentages, mean scores, standard deviations, and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to examine awareness patterns and compare mean awareness scores across universities. The findings revealed variation in reported awareness across the selected instruments. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, recorded the highest awareness levels, at 54.8% and 54.3%, respectively. In contrast, the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme recorded the lowest awareness level (29.1%), followed by the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 (29.4%). The university-wise ANOVA results did not show statistically significant differences in mean awareness scores for any of the ten instruments at the .05 significance level. These findings indicate uneven self-reported awareness of gender equality laws and policies among the surveyed students and indicate the importance of strengthening legal literacy initiatives in higher education. The study recommends greater emphasis on accessible legal education and systematic awareness programmes while acknowledging that reported awareness does not necessarily represent detailed legal knowledge.

Keywords: legal awareness, gender equality, university students, gender equality legislation, legal literacy, Tamil Nadu

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Introduction

In December 2024, an alleged sexual assault on a student at Anna University in Chennai brought renewed attention to the protection of students' rights and the responsibility of higher education institutions to provide safe learning environments. The incident prompted concerns about campus security, institutional accountability and the effectiveness of existing protective mechanisms. In its aftermath, the Tamil Nadu Higher Education Department directed educational institutions to strengthen campus safety measures and raise awareness about mechanisms such as Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) and the prevention of sexual harassment framework (Dhamotharan, 2024). This episode enlighten a fundamental question extending beyond the existence of legal protections, Are students sufficiently aware of the laws, policies, and institutional mechanisms intended to safeguard their rights? The incident itself does not establish students' level of legal awareness; rather, it underscores the importance of examining whether formal protections are accompanied by accessible information and adequate awareness among the people they are designed to protect.

The existence of legal protections does not necessarily mean that the people they are intended to protect are familiar with their rights or understand how these protections can be accessed. In the context of gender equality, awareness of constitutional provisions, legislation, government policies, and welfare schemes is an important dimension of legal literacy and social empowerment. Students entering higher education encounter a range of social and institutional environments in which questions of discrimination, personal safety, equal opportunity, dignity, and gender-based violence may arise. Familiarity with relevant legal provisions can help them recognise discriminatory practices, understand institutional responsibilities, and identify appropriate mechanisms for seeking assistance. Accordingly, assessing students' awareness of gender equality laws and policies is important for understanding the extent to which formal legal protections are recognised among young adults in higher education.

The constitutional foundation for gender equality in India is provided by the Constitution of India. Article 14 establishes equality before the law and equal protection of the laws, while Article 15 prohibits discrimination on specified grounds, including sex. Article 16 provides for equality of opportunity in matters of public employment. Article 39(d), a Directive Principle of State Policy, addresses equal pay for equal work for men and women, while Article 42 directs the State to make provision for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief (Government of India,

1950). Together, these provisions establish important principles for examining gender equality in public life, employment, and social relations. However, constitutional guarantees represent the normative and legal foundations of equality, their practical significance also depends on the development of specific legal protections, institutional mechanisms and public understanding of the rights they establish.

India has developed a range of legislative and policy instruments addressing different dimensions of gender inequality and social protection. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, provides a legal framework for protecting women experiencing domestic violence. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, establishes provisions concerning the prevention and redressal of workplace sexual harassment. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, address practices associated with gendered social disadvantage and the protection of girls and women. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, addresses discrimination against transgender persons and provides a framework for the protection of their rights. The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, provides a broader framework for the care and protection of children. In addition to legislation, policy and programme initiatives, including the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001, and the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme, seek to advance women's empowerment and improve the social value, protection, and educational opportunities of girls (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2012.). These instruments differ in their legal status, purpose, and scope, but collectively illustrate the variety of approaches through which gender equality and related protections are addressed in India.

Nevertheless, the existence of legislation and policy instruments does not establish that citizens, including university students, are familiar with their provisions. Legal awareness involves more than recognising the name of an Act or having heard about a government scheme. A deeper understanding may include familiarity with its objectives, the rights or protections it provides, and the institutional mechanisms through which it can be implemented. The National Legal Services Authority (NALSA, 2025) identifies legal awareness and literacy as important components of access to justice and describes initiatives such as seminars, lectures, awareness campaigns, educational materials, and legal literacy programmes at school and college levels. Such initiatives reflect the importance of communicating legal information in accessible forms. For university students, knowledge of relevant legal and policy frameworks may be particularly important

because they are both current members of educational institutions and future participants in professional, civic, and social life.

Higher education institutions have a specific role in strengthening awareness of gender-related rights and protections. The University Grants Commission's regulations on the prevention, prohibition, and redressal of sexual harassment in higher educational institutions require institutions to publicise relevant provisions and organise training programmes or workshops to improve awareness among students, faculty, and institutional functionaries (University Grants Commission, 2016). These provisions demonstrate that institutional responsibility extends beyond the formal existence of complaint mechanisms to communicating relevant rights, entitlements, and responsibilities. Students' awareness of laws and policies is therefore an important dimension in examining the reach of institutional sensitisation and legal literacy initiatives. The awareness of a legal instrument should be distinguished from actual knowledge of its provisions, and both should be distinguished from the availability or effectiveness of institutional support mechanisms.

Existing empirical research has begun to examine students' awareness of particular legal protections and gender-related rights. Sharma (2022), for example, investigated awareness of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, among students in higher educational institutions in Punjab. James et al. (2025) examined college-going students' knowledge and attitudes concerning women's personal safety, dignity, and rights in Kollam, Kerala. These studies illustrate the relevance of examining students' legal awareness in relation to gender equality, personal safety, and protection from discrimination. At the same time, their specific geographical settings and subject emphases indicate the value of further research that examines students' awareness of a broader range of constitutional provisions, laws, policies, and government schemes within a defined regional context. A broader assessment can help distinguish instruments that are widely recognised from those that may receive comparatively less attention among students.

In Tamil Nadu, examining students' awareness of gender equality laws and policies is relevant to understanding the extent to which formal legal protections are recognised within higher education. Students may be familiar with prominent legislation addressing domestic violence and sexual harassment while having limited awareness of constitutional provisions, child protection legislation, transgender rights and government schemes. Such differences should not be assumed in advance, they require systematic empirical assessment. Awareness may differ across individual

legal instruments because of differences in their public visibility, perceived relevance, exposure through education, and dissemination through institutional or community initiatives. Assessing these differences can provide a clearer picture of students' reported awareness and help identify areas in which further legal literacy efforts may be useful.

Against this background, the present study, assesses students' awareness of selected constitutional provisions, legislative measures, policies, and government schemes relating to gender equality and the protection of women and gender minorities. The study considers ten items such as, constitutional provisions under Articles 14, 15, 16, 39, and 42, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001, the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, and the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme. Using responses categorised by awareness, partial awareness, and lack of awareness, the study seeks to map the distribution of reported awareness across these instruments among university students in selected universities in Tamil Nadu.

Methodology

The present study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional, descriptive and analytical research design to examine university students' awareness of selected gender equality laws, constitutional provisions, policies, and government schemes in Tamil Nadu. The study was based on primary data collected from postgraduate students enrolled in two-year programmes in the Faculties of Arts and Science at selected universities in Tamil Nadu. According to the study's sampling framework, the initial universe comprised 11 universities offering relevant postgraduate programmes. Seven universities were selected for the investigation. the University of Madras, Bharathiar University, Annamalai University, Bharathidasan University, Alagappa University, Madurai Kamaraj University, and Manonmaniam Sundaranar University are the selected universities. The data were collected through direct interaction with students using a structured interview schedule administered during field visits to the selected universities. For the present paper, the analysis was restricted to respondents' awareness of the ten legal and policy instruments listed in the questionnaire. A multistage sampling design was employed to select institutions, faculties, departments, and student respondents. In the first stage, seven universities were selected from the

11 universities identified in the study's sampling framework, with the aim of providing geographical representation across Tamil Nadu. In the second stage, the Faculties of Arts and Science and selected departments representing different academic disciplines were included. In the final stage, students were selected using simple random sampling from the identified departments, subject to their presence on the day of data collection and fulfilment of the eligibility criteria.The data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. The analysis was conducted in three stages: descriptive analysis, comparative analysis, and testing of university-wise differences. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed to examine whether mean awareness scores differed significantly across the seven universities. A separate ANOVA was conducted for each of the ten awareness items, with university affiliation as the independent grouping variable and the coded awareness response for the relevant item as the dependent variable.

Result

The study assessed students' awareness of ten selected constitutional provisions, legislative measures, national policies, and government schemes intended to promote gender equality and protect women, children, and gender minorities. Respondents classified their awareness of each item as "Aware," "Partially aware," or "Not aware" and is exhibit in table 2.

Table 2. Students' Awareness of Selected Gender Equality Laws, Policies, and Schemes

Laws, policies, and schemes	Not aware, n (%)	Partially aware, n (%)	Aware, n (%)
Constitution of India (Articles 14, 15, 16, 39 and 42)	171 (39.9)	105 (24.5)	153 (35.7)
Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005	143 (33.3)	87 (20.3)	199 (46.4)
Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013 (POSH Act)	145 (33.8)	70 (16.3)	214 (49.9)
Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961	140 (32.6)	54 (12.6)	235 (54.8)
Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006	140 (32.6)	56 (13.1)	233 (54.3)
National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001	171 (39.9)	75 (17.5)	183 (42.7)
Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015	176 (41.0)	95 (22.1)	158 (36.8)
Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019	180 (42.0)	100 (23.3)	149 (34.7)
Equal Remuneration Act, 1976	202 (47.1)	101 (23.5)	126 (29.4)
Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme	222 (51.7)	82 (19.1)	125 (29.1)

The findings reveal considerable variation in students' reported awareness across the ten items. The highest levels of awareness were recorded for the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, which was recognised by 54.8% of respondents, and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, recognised by 54.3%. These were the only two items for which more than half of the respondents reported being aware. Awareness of the POSH Act, 2013, was reported by 49.9% of students, followed by the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, at 46.4%. The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001, was recognised by 42.7% of respondents.

Relatively lower levels of awareness were observed for the constitutional provisions listed in the questionnaire and for legislation concerning children and transgender persons. Only 35.7% of respondents reported awareness of Articles 14, 15, 16, 39 and 42 of the Constitution of India. Awareness of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, stood at 36.8%, while 34.7% reported awareness of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019. These findings indicate that recognition of some important constitutional and statutory instruments was not widespread within the sample. The largest awareness gap was observed for the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme, for which 51.7% of respondents reported being unaware. The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, also showed limited recognition, with 47.1% reporting no awareness. Around 42.0% of respondents were unaware of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, while 41.0% were unaware of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015. These results indicate that awareness was not uniform across different forms of legal and policy protection. The partially aware category provides an additional indication of the distribution of reported familiarity. This category accounted for 24.5% of respondents for the selected constitutional provisions, 23.5% for the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, and 23.3% for the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019. Such responses are important because partial awareness is distinct from both complete lack of awareness and self-reported awareness. However, the questionnaire does not establish whether respondents who selected "Partially aware" could correctly identify the relevant provisions or explain their application. the findings demonstrate that students' reported awareness differed substantially across the selected items. Awareness was comparatively higher for legislation addressing dowry and child marriage, whereas the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme and the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, recorded the lowest proportions of affirmative awareness. Awareness of constitutional provisions and measures relating to transgender rights and child protection was also limited.

The analysis of mean awareness scores revealed variations in students' reported awareness of gender equality laws and policies across the ten instruments examined. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, recorded the highest overall mean awareness scores (M = 2.22 for both), followed by the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013 (M = 2.16), and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (M = 2.13). In contrast, the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme recorded the lowest mean score (M = 1.77), followed by the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 (M = 1.82). These findings indicate that reported awareness was comparatively higher for legislation addressing dowry and child marriage, while lower mean scores were observed for the selected government scheme and equal remuneration legislation. The one-way ANOVA results showed that none of the ten instruments exhibited statistically significant differences in mean awareness scores across the seven universities at the 5% significance level ($p > .05$). Although the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme produced the largest F-statistic, the result narrowly missed the conventional significance threshold ($F = 2.113$, $p = .051$). Hence the findings indicate that differences in awareness were more apparent across the types of laws and policies than as statistically significant differences between universities.

Table 3. Comparative Mean Awareness Scores for Gender Equality Laws and Policies across Selected Universities in Tamil Nadu

Gender equality law or policy	**University of Madras**	**Bharathiar University**	**Annamalai University**	**Bharathidasan University**	**Alagappa University**	**Madurai Kamaraj University**	**Manonmaniam Sundaranar University**	**Overall Mean (SD)**	**F value**	**p-value**
Constitution of India (Articles 14, 15, 16, 39 and 42)	2.01	2.11	1.93	2.02	1.76	1.9	1.96	1.96 (0.869)	1.045	0.396
Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005	2.04	2.22	2.11	2.3	1.95	2.15	2.16	2.13 (0.884)	1.055	0.389
Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013 (POSH Act)	2.11	2.23	2.13	2.23	2.05	2.23	2.16	2.16 (0.902)	0.413	0.871
Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961	2.18	2.32	2.23	2.33	2.12	2.19	2.16	2.22 (0.909)	0.48	0.824

Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006	2.17	2.32	2.23	2.31	2.06	2.25	2.18	2.22 (0.908)	0.65	0.69
National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001	1.96	2.02	2.11	2.16	1.98	2.02	1.94	2.03 (0.909)	0.478	0.825
Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015	1.9	2	1.95	2.05	1.92	1.92	1.96	1.96 (0.882)	0.208	0.974
Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019	1.99	2.05	1.87	1.91	1.89	1.88	1.88	1.93 (0.874)	0.366	0.9
Equal Remuneration Act, 1976	1.82	1.78	1.85	1.92	1.79	1.75	1.84	1.82 (0.857)	0.257	0.957
Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme, 2015	1.92	1.95	1.77	1.83	1.5	1.65	1.76	1.77 (0.871)	2.113	0.051

Variation in Awareness Across Legal and Policy Instruments

One of the principal findings concerns the variation in students' reported awareness across the ten selected instruments. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, recorded the highest proportions of respondents reporting awareness, at 54.8% and 54.3%, respectively. Their mean awareness scores were also the highest among the ten items, at 2.22 for each instrument. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, commonly known as the POSH Act, recorded an awareness proportion of 49.9%, followed by the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, at 46.4%. These findings indicate comparatively greater self-reported awareness of legislation addressing dowry, child marriage, workplace sexual harassment, and domestic violence. The comparatively higher awareness of these instruments may be associated with their visibility in public discussions, educational activities, and debates about women's safety and social practices. However, the present study did not investigate the sources through which students acquired their knowledge. Consequently, the observed pattern should be interpreted as a difference in reported awareness rather than evidence that particular laws receive more effective publicity or educational attention. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, prohibits the giving or taking of dowry, while the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, establishes a framework for preventing child marriages

(Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961; Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006). Their comparatively higher recognition suggests that the social issues addressed by these laws are relatively familiar to the surveyed students, although the study does not establish how accurately respondents understand their provisions. The finding concerning the POSH Act is also relevant to higher education. The legislation establishes a framework for preventing and redressing sexual harassment of women at the workplace, including the establishment of Internal Complaints Committees under the conditions specified by the Act (Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace [Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal] Act, 2013). Sharma (2022) specifically examined awareness of the POSH Act among students in higher educational institutions in Punjab, demonstrating the relevance of examining students' familiarity with workplace sexual harassment legislation. The present study extends this subject to a broader set of legal and policy instruments and examines differences across seven universities in Tamil Nadu. However, because the geographical settings, samples, and analytical approaches differ, the findings should not be treated as directly comparable estimates of legal awareness.

Awareness of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, was reported by 46.4% of respondents, while 33.3% reported being unaware of it and 20.3% reported partial awareness. The Act provides legal protections and remedies for women affected by domestic violence (Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005). These findings indicate that recognition of the legislation was not universal even within a university-going population. the survey does not establish whether respondents understood the forms of abuse covered by the Act, the remedies available. This distinction is important because recognising the name of an Act does not necessarily mean that an individual can identify its protections or use the relevant legal mechanisms.

Awareness of Constitutional Provisions and Institutional Rights

The findings concerning the Constitution of India indicate a substantial gap in students' reported awareness of the selected constitutional provisions. Only 35.7% of respondents reported being aware of Articles 14, 15, 16, 39, and 42, while 39.9% reported no awareness and 24.5% reported partial awareness. The mean awareness score for this item was 1.96 on the three-point scale. These results are important because the constitutional provisions selected for the survey relate to equality before the law, non-discrimination, equality of opportunity in public employment, equal pay for men and women, and just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief (Constitution of

India, 1950). These principles establish an important foundation for understanding gender equality in the legal and institutional context of India. The relatively limited reported awareness of these provisions indicate that their significance may not be fully recognised by a substantial proportion of respondents. This interpretation requires caution, however, because the questionnaire combined five constitutional provisions in a single item. A respondent might be familiar with one or more of the provisions without recognising all five. Accordingly, the observed result cannot establish that respondents were unaware of every constitutional guarantee included in the question. Future research could examine the provisions individually and assess whether students can identify their meanings and applications.

Legal literacy initiatives can help bridge the gap between constitutional rights and public understanding. NALSA describes a range of legal awareness activities, including seminars, lectures, informational materials, competitions, and programmes conducted at school and college levels. The Government of India has also reported large-scale legal awareness activities conducted by legal services authorities, illustrating the institutional importance attached to communicating legal information to the public (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2025). The findings of the study indicate that higher education institutions could make greater use of such educational approaches to help students understand constitutional equality and the legal protections connected with it.

The importance of legal awareness also extends beyond the national constitutional framework. India ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1993, committing itself to an international framework concerned with eliminating discrimination against women (United Nations, 1979). The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has emphasised the importance of accessible justice systems, awareness of legal rights, and knowledge of available remedies in its General Recommendation No. 33 on women's access to justice (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2015). General Recommendation No. 35 further emphasises comprehensive approaches to preventing and addressing gender-based violence against women (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2017). These frameworks reinforce the importance of making legal protections understandable and accessible. However, the present study did not directly measure students' awareness of CEDAW or international human rights instruments, and therefore these frameworks provide context rather than direct evidence about the respondents.

Awareness Gaps Concerning Policies, Government Schemes, and Specific Rights

The lowest proportion of reported awareness was observed for the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme. Only 29.1% of respondents reported awareness of the scheme, while 51.7% were unaware of it and 19.1% reported partial awareness. The mean awareness score was 1.77, the lowest among all ten instruments. The scheme aims to address gender-biased sex selection and promote the survival, protection, and education of the girl child through behavioural and social change initiatives (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2012). The results therefore identify this government initiative as an area in which reported awareness was particularly limited among the surveyed students. This finding is relevant because public schemes often depend on the communication of their objectives, target populations, and intended social outcomes. Unlike a statute that establishes specific legal provisions, a government scheme may be encountered through awareness campaigns, public communication, educational programmes, or community initiatives. Students' limited reported awareness could reflect differences in exposure to these communication channels, although the present study did not test this explanation. The result supports the need to examine how policy information is communicated within universities and whether students are provided with opportunities to understand the objectives of major gender-related initiatives. A similar pattern was evident for the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976. Only 29.4% of respondents reported awareness of the Act, while 47.1% were unaware of it and 23.5% reported partial awareness. Its mean awareness score was 1.82. The original Act addressed equal remuneration for men and women workers and discrimination based on sex in employment (Equal Remuneration Act, 1976). However, this result requires an important legal qualification: the questionnaire refers to the historical title of the Act, while wage-related legislation has subsequently been consolidated under the Code on Wages, 2019, which includes provisions concerning equal wages irrespective of gender (Code on Wages, 2019). The study's result should therefore be interpreted as reported awareness of the named Act, rather than as a complete assessment of students' awareness of the current wage-equality framework. The date of data collection should be reported clearly so that this distinction can be evaluated in its appropriate legal context.

The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, also showed limited reported awareness. Only 34.7% of respondents reported being aware of the Act, while 42.0% reported no awareness and 23.3% reported partial awareness. The Act establishes protections relating to the

rights and welfare of transgender persons, including provisions concerning discrimination and inclusive education (Transgender Persons [Protection of Rights] Act, 2019). This finding is important because awareness of legal protections for gender minorities is a component of a broader understanding of equality and inclusion. Limited recognition of the Act may indicate a need for greater educational engagement with transgender rights and the legal responsibilities of institutions. Nevertheless, the survey did not assess respondents' attitudes towards transgender persons, their knowledge of particular provisions, or their experiences of inclusion; such conclusions cannot be inferred directly from the awareness results.

Awareness of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, was also limited, with 36.8% reporting awareness and 41.0% reporting no awareness. Although the Act has a broader child-protection focus rather than functioning solely as a gender equality law, its inclusion in the questionnaire reflects the wider relationship between social protection, children's rights, and gender-related disadvantage (Juvenile Justice [Care and Protection of Children] Act, 2015). These findings suggest that awareness-building efforts might usefully address a wider range of rights-related instruments rather than concentrating exclusively on legislation that receives comparatively greater public attention.

The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001, recorded an awareness proportion of 42.7%, whereas 39.9% of respondents reported being unaware and 17.5% reported partial awareness. The policy was formulated to advance women's development and empowerment and eliminate discrimination against women (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2014). Its comparatively moderate recognition, alongside the lower awareness of the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme, suggests that policy instruments may merit explicit treatment in legal literacy and gender equality education. At the same time, awareness of a policy should not be equated with an understanding of its implementation, outcomes, or current status.

University-Wise Variation in Awareness

The comparative analysis examined whether mean awareness scores differed across the University of Madras, Bharathiar University, Annamalai University, Bharathidasan University, Alagappa University, Madurai Kamaraj University, and Manonmaniam Sundaranar University. Although the descriptive means varied across institutions, none of the ten one-way ANOVA tests reached statistical significance at the .05 level. The Beti Bachao Beti Padhao result was closest to the conventional threshold for statistical significance, but it did not reach the specified level. It should

therefore not be described as a statistically significant difference. the non-significant results for the other items do not establish that the seven universities have identical levels of awareness. They indicate that the analyses did not provide sufficient statistical evidence to conclude that mean scores differed by university affiliation within the sample.

These results direct attention towards the possibility that the observed awareness gaps extend across the participating institutions rather than being statistically concentrated in a particular university. However, the study does not establish why the distributions appear similar or whether the universities have similar curricula, legal literacy initiatives, or communication practices. Research on higher education and gender equality has emphasised that the existence of institutional policies does not automatically eliminate inequalities in educational experiences (Tsouroufli et al., 2025). Accordingly, the present findings support further investigation of the role of institutional learning environments without establishing that the participating universities provide identical levels or quality of legal education.

Legal Awareness, Gender Equality Education, and the Role of Universities

The findings have implications for the way universities approach legal literacy and gender equality education. Higher education institutions provide opportunities for students to engage with constitutional principles, laws, policies, and the institutional mechanisms through which rights can be protected. The University Grants Commission's regulations on the prevention, prohibition, and redressal of sexual harassment in higher educational institutions establish responsibilities relating to the prevention of sexual harassment and the promotion of awareness among institutional communities (University Grants Commission [UGC], 2016). The UGC's Gender Champions initiative also aims to develop gender-sensitive attitudes and positive social norms within educational institutions (UGC, 2016.). These initiatives establish an institutional basis for promoting gender equality awareness, though their existence alone does not demonstrate the extent of students' knowledge of individual laws. The study's findings shows that universities could strengthen legal awareness through sustained and accessible educational activities. These might include orientation programmes, curriculum-based discussions, legal literacy workshops, interactive sessions with legal services authorities, and information resources explaining the purpose and scope of relevant laws and policies. The objective should extend beyond memorising the names of legal instruments towards helping students understand their relevance, the protections they provide, and the appropriate procedures for seeking assistance when necessary. NALSA's

documented use of seminars, lectures, awareness materials, debates, and college-level legal literacy programmes provides examples of approaches that can support this objective (NALSA, 2012.). The literature also highlights the importance of the quality and continuity of gender-related educational interventions. Upadhyay et al. (2023) examined the role of gender sensitisation training in addressing gender-based bullying, inequality, and violence in Indian organisational settings. Condron et al. (2025), in a scoping review of gender equality training for students in higher education, examined the range of approaches used and the importance of evaluating such interventions. These works support a distinction between merely offering an awareness activity and evaluating whether it achieves its intended educational objectives. In the context of the present study, universities could assess not only attendance at legal literacy sessions but also changes in awareness, understanding of legal provisions, and familiarity with available support mechanisms.

The broader policy context also reinforces the need to connect formal commitments with practical implementation. The World Bank's Women, Business and the Law 2024 report distinguishes between laws on the books, supportive frameworks for implementation, and expert assessments of how those arrangements operate in practice (World Bank, 2024). While the report focuses on women's economic opportunities rather than university students' awareness, its distinction between formal legal frameworks and implementation is useful for interpreting the present findings. A law or policy may exist without being well understood by the population it is intended to benefit. Similarly, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5 emphasises both the elimination of discrimination and the adoption and strengthening of policies and enforceable legislation to promote gender equality (United Nations, 2015). These objectives highlight the relevance of accessible legal information alongside formal legislative measures.

The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women, 2018) also emphasises the need for coordinated and accessible approaches to women's access to justice. Together, these policy and institutional frameworks suggest that legal awareness should be viewed as a continuing educational responsibility rather than a one-time activity. The present study does not evaluate the effectiveness of specific university programmes; instead, it identifies the distribution of self-reported awareness and provides evidence that can inform future assessment and programme development.

Discussion

The present study examined university students' self-reported awareness of ten selected constitutional provisions, laws, policies, and government schemes relating to gender equality and the protection of women, children, and transgender persons. The findings reveal considerable variation in awareness across the instruments examined, alongside an absence of statistically significant university-wise differences in the mean awareness scores. These findings raise an important question about the extent to which legal protections are reflected in students' awareness of their rights and the mechanisms intended to safeguard them. Legal awareness is an important component of access to justice because individuals need to recognise their rights and identify the remedies available when those rights are violated. The National Legal Services Authority (NALSA, n.d.) identifies legal literacy as a means of informing people about their rights and the functioning of legal services institutions. Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2026) emphasises that legal awareness is important for enabling individuals to pursue remedies and participate meaningfully in the protection of their rights. In this context, the present study contributes to the understanding of legal awareness among university students in Tamil Nadu, while recognising that self-reported awareness does not necessarily establish detailed knowledge of legal provisions or the ability to exercise them.

Conclusion

The study identifies uneven self-reported awareness of gender equality laws and policies among students in seven selected universities in Tamil Nadu. Students reported greater awareness of the Dowry Prohibition Act and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, whereas the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme and the Equal Remuneration Act recorded the lowest awareness scores. The university-wise ANOVA results did not identify statistically significant differences for any of the ten instruments, although descriptive variations were present. These findings do not establish that the participating universities provide identical levels of legal education, nor do they demonstrate that students lack the ability to exercise their rights. Rather, they highlight the importance of improving the accessibility and educational relevance of legal information. Strengthening legal literacy, integrating gender equality into educational practice, and evaluating the reach of awareness initiatives could help universities contribute more effectively to students' understanding of constitutional equality and the legal protections intended to safeguard their rights.

Implications for Legal Literacy and Future Research

The findings point to several priorities for university-based legal literacy initiatives. Educational activities could give greater attention to the legal and policy instruments that recorded comparatively low awareness in the survey, particularly the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme, the Equal Remuneration Act as named in the questionnaire, and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019. The constitutional provisions relating to equality and non-discrimination may benefit from more explicit explanation, including their relevance to students' educational and professional lives. universities could collaborate with legal services authorities and relevant public agencies to provide accurate, accessible information on the purpose of selected laws and the procedures for obtaining legal assistance. The reported scale of legal awareness activities undertaken by legal services authorities across India demonstrates that such educational approaches already form part of the broader access-to-justice framework (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2025). Future studies should distinguish awareness of a legal instrument from knowledge of its provisions and capacity to access the protections it offers. This distinction could be examined by including objective questions testing respondents' ability to identify the purpose of each Act, recognise relevant scenarios, or locate appropriate institutional and legal remedies. The study could also benefit from investigating the sources of students' information, their participation in legal literacy activities, and the extent to which legal education forms part of their curricula. A combination of surveys and qualitative interviews could help identify how students encounter legal information and why awareness varies across specific instruments.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the present results. The sample comprised 429 students from seven selected universities in Tamil Nadu, and the findings should not automatically be generalised to all higher education institutions in the state. The outcome was measured through self-reported awareness rather than an objective assessment of legal knowledge. The cross-sectional design also does not establish the causes of the observed differences in awareness across instruments or demonstrate that institutional initiatives influence awareness. In addition, the university-wise ANOVA tests examined each item separately; they did not assess the overall explanatory contribution of university characteristics or other potential factors. Subsequent studies could test the reliability and validity of a composite awareness measure, use ordinal or non-parametric methods as appropriate, and investigate whether participation in legal literacy activities is associated with stronger awareness.

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