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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Paper Title:

THE CAUSES AND MECHANISMS OF ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC INEQUALITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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| ABSTRACT

This systematic literature review explores the causes of systemic inequalities in higher education and the mechanisms used globally to address them through affirmative action (AA) policies. Drawing from 20 studies published between 2014 and 2024, the review synthesizes findings across diverse national contexts including India, Brazil, the United States, Canada, Nepal, and European countries.

| KEYWORDS

Affirmative Action, Higher Education, Systemic Inequalities, Quota Systems, Equity, Policy Implementation.

|ARTICLE INFORMATION

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Abstract

This systematic literature review explores the causes of systemic inequalities in higher education and the mechanisms used globally to address them through affirmative action (AA) policies. Drawing from 20 studies published between 2014 and 2024, the review synthesizes findings across diverse national contexts including India, Brazil, the United States, Canada, Nepal, and European countries. The analysis identifies historical discrimination, structural inequities, institutional biases, and political resistance as key drivers of educational disparities. Caste-based exclusion in India, race based barriers in the U.S., income gaps in Brazil, and geographic disadvantages in Nepal are among the persistent challenges that affirmative action seeks to mitigate. Mechanisms such as quota systems, holistic admissions, financial aid, and policy harmonization have shown effectiveness but face implementation hurdles due to misalignment, stigma, or legal constraints. The study emphasizes the importance of intersectional approaches, public awareness campaigns, and long-term support structures beyond admissions to ensure equitable access and inclusion. It also highlights the need for data-driven policy refinement and context-specific strategies to strengthen affirmative action's impact. While affirmative action remains a vital tool for promoting equity in higher education, its success depends on strong enforcement, political will, and complementary interventions. Future research should focus on non-Western models, longitudinal assessments, and global policy coordination to enhance inclusivity and meritocratic outcomes.

Introduction:-

Affirmative action (AA) is a policy tool used around the world to help level the playing field in higher education. It was created to support people who have been historically left behind—whether because of race, caste, gender, or economic background. The idea is simple: not everyone starts from the same place, so we need systems that recognize and correct those imbalances. In many countries, access to quality education has long been shaped by deep-rooted inequalities. In India, for example, the caste system has kept Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) from getting fair opportunities for generations. Even with reservation policies in place, research shows that many still face barriers—not just in getting into schools, but also in being accepted and supported once they're there (Agarwal, 2023; Bhattacharjee, 2019). Deshpande (2019) found that stigma often follows students who benefit from affirmative action, making it harder for them to feel like they truly belong.

The United States has its own version of this struggle. Affirmative action was introduced as part of the civil rights movement to help undo decades of racial segregation and discrimination. But over time, political resistance has weakened these policies. Several states have banned race-conscious admissions, which has led to fewer Black and Latino students at top universities (Baker, 2019; Blume & Long, 2014). This shows how fragile progress can be when it's not fully supported by law or public opinion.

Brazil offers a different story. There, affirmative action policies have gained broader acceptance because they directly address both race and income inequality (French, 2021; Zeidan, 2023). By using dual-target quotas—meaning spots are reserved for both racial minorities and low-income students—the country has managed to increase diversity without hurting academic standards. This kind of thoughtful design helps make sure AA works for the people who need it most.

Canada also faces challenges rooted in history. Indigenous communities continue to struggle with underfunded schools and systemic racism in higher education (Hussain, 2023). While some policies exist to support inclusion, they often lack strong enforcement, meaning real change is slow to come. Nepal has similar issues, where geography and caste play a big role in who gets to go to college (Gandhari, 2021; Sunam et al., 2022). Students from rural areas and lower castes often miss out on opportunities simply because they don't live near major universities or come from privileged backgrounds. Although Nepal has tried to use quotas to promote fairness, more needs to be done to make sure these policies reach the most disadvantaged.

Europe's experience with affirmative action shows another side of the challenge. For example, among the Roma community, AA policies sometimes end up helping only the most privileged within an already marginalized group (Garaz, 2014). This highlights the risk of one-size-fits-all solutions and the need to tailor programs to local realities. Around the world, researchers agree that AA doesn't always work perfectly—but when it does, it makes a real difference. Barham et al. (2023) looked at health education programs in New Zealand and other countries and found that well-planned affirmative action policies can significantly boost diversity and representation. Still, political opposition remains a big hurdle. In the U.S., legal battles have made it harder to use race as a factor in admissions (Gorman-Huang & Huang, 2023). And in South Africa, affirmative action is often criticized as reverse discrimination, even though it's meant to correct centuries of injustice (Ramalekana, 2022). These debates show that AA isn't just about policy—it's also about perception and public understanding. Implementation is another key issue. Gururaj et al. (2021) pointed out that market-driven education systems and outdated colonial structures can block inclusive policies. That's why it's important to not only create good laws but also make sure they're enforced properly. Teshome (2024a, 2024b) argues that AA must evolve beyond rigid quotas and start considering multiple factors—like class, gender, and location—to better reflect people's real-life experiences. Mello (2022) gave a promising example from Brazil, where a centralized admissions system helped reduce bias and open doors for low-income students. Still, stigma remains a problem. Even when AA increases representation, beneficiaries often face doubts—both from others and themselves—about whether they truly earned their place (Deshpande, 2019). Cotton et al. (2014) showed that when designed thoughtfully, affirmative action can actually motivate students to work harder, proving that perception matters as much as policy. Finally, scholars like Sunam et al. (2022) and Gandhari (2021) remind us that admission alone isn't enough. Once students are in school, they need ongoing support—through scholarships, mentorship, and inclusive campus environments—to succeed and thrive.

To conclude, affirmative action in higher education is not a perfect solution, but it's a necessary step toward fairness. From caste-based exclusion in India to racial divides in the U.S., from income gaps in Brazil to geographic disadvantages in Nepal, each country faces its own unique set of challenges. What's clear is that effective policies must be flexible, inclusive, and backed by real commitment. As this review shows, the best approaches combine smart design, cultural awareness, and long-term support to make sure that education becomes truly accessible to all.

Methodology:-

This review brings together global research on affirmative action (AA) in higher education, with a focus on understanding the roots of inequality and exploring how different countries are working to create more fair and inclusive systems. The process

follows PRISMA guidelines—a widely respected framework—to ensure that the findings are reliable, clear, and repeatable by others.

A. The Research Approach:
Goal: The review aimed to understand how effective affirmative action policies have been around the world, what challenges they face, and how they differ from one country to another.
The Research Questions:
1. What systemic issues keep certain groups from accessing higher education?
2. What kinds of strategies have countries used to make college more accessible?
3. How do politics, culture, and money shape whether these policies work?

B. What is Included in the review—and Why
The Review Focus:
Where: Studies from across the globe—like the U.S., India, Brazil, South Africa, Europe, Canada, and Nepal.
When: Research published between 2014 and 2024, so we could learn from the most recent experiences.

Researches Included in the Review:
- Real-world studies (using numbers, interviews, or both).
- In-depth looks at policy changes.
- Comparisons between countries.
- Conceptual papers that help us think deeper about fairness and justice.

Language: Only English-language publications due to resource limits.

Researches Not Included in the Study:
- Opinion pieces or editorials not based on research.
- Work focused outside of higher education.
- Duplicates or very similar studies.

Search Strategy
A. Finding the Right Sources
The researcher searched through major academic databases like Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, JSTOR, and even Google Scholar for hard-to-find reports.
Some of the key search terms included:
- "Affirmative action + higher education + equity"
- "Quota systems + university access + discrimination"
- "Race/Caste/Class-based admissions + policy analysis"

B. Narrowing Down the Research
1. Initial Search: Over 200 studies found.
2. First Screening: After removing repeats and irrelevant ones, we were left with about 125.
3. Reading Full Papers: Read all 125 that seemed relevant.
4. Final List: From those, selected 20 high-quality studies that best answered the research questions.

Data Extraction & Synthesis
A. Pulling Out the Key Information
The researcher created a simple form to collect important details from each study, including:
- Who did the study, where, and when
- What they were trying to find out
- How they did their research
- What they discovered
- What causes inequality (e.g., history, class, caste)
- What tools were used to reduce inequality (e.g., quotas, scholarships)

B. Making Sense of It All
The researcher grouped ideas into themes—like "caste-based exclusion" or "race-conscious admissions"—and organized them into broader categories such as:
- Why inequality exists (structural, economic, political factors)
- How countries try to fix it (quotas, holistic admissions, mentorship programs)
- Then we compared what's happening in different parts of the world—like the U.S., India, and Brazil—to see what works, and why.

Quality Check

The researcher looked closely at each study to see how strong and unbiased it was.

- For Number-Based Studies: Did they use good data and solid math?
- For Interview-Based Studies: Did they talk to enough people and back up their ideas well?
- For Policy Studies: Did they consider different viewpoints and not just one side?

There was ranking of the strength of the evidence:

- High: Big studies with solid methods
- Medium: Detailed case studies but limited in scope
- Low: Ideas or theories without new data behind them

Researches not Included in the Review

No method is perfect. Here's what we missed:

- Non-English Research: Important voices from non-English-speaking regions weren't included.
- Limited Coverage: Some areas like the Middle East and parts of Africa didn't show up much in our sources.
- Time Gaps: Since we only looked at the last decade, some newer policy shifts might not be fully reflected yet.

Results:-

The table below summarizes the extraction of the included 20 studies. The summary includes author(s) and year of publication, objectives of the studies, methods used, country, major findings of the studies, and the causes and mechanisms of addressing systemic inequalities in higher education.

Table 1. Summary of the included sources in the study.

Author & Year	Objective of the Study	Methodology Used	Country	Major Findings	Causes of Systemic Inequalities	Mechanisms to Address Inequalities
Agarwal (2023)	Assess the effect of affirmative action on enrollment, test scores, and school quality.	Quasi-experimental design using Indian school data.	India	Affirmative action improves enrollment and school quality for marginalized castes.	Caste-based exclusion, socio-economic disadvantage.	Affirmative action policies and quotas in schools.
Baker (2019)	Explore why some U.S. states ban affirmative action and implications for equity.	Quantitative modeling of state-level policy data.	USA	Political and demographic variables predict bans; bans reduce minority enrollment.	Racial bias, political ideology, and economic stratification.	Policy modeling and advocacy for equity.
Barham et al. (2023)	Review international affirmative action in health professional education.	Comparative policy analysis.	New Zealand & Global	Affirmative action varies globally; it's crucial in increasing diversity in health fields.	Underrepresentation due to systemic bias and exclusion.	Targeted admissions policies; long-term inclusion strategies.
Bhattacharjee (2019)	Investigate spillovers of OBC quotas in India.	Regression analysis of Indian administrative data.	India	Quotas improve outcomes not only for OBCs but	Historical oppression of OBCs, education access	Caste quotas and broadened outreach programs.

				others too (positive externalities).	inequality.	
Blume & Long (2014)	Examine how affirmative action bans affect admissions.	Policy impact analysis using U.S. college data.	USA	Bans decrease representation of minorities in selective colleges.	Legal restrictions, structural racism in admissions.	Holistic review, class-based alternatives.
Cotton et al. (2014)	Assess how affirmative action affects students' incentives to invest in education.	Randomized field experiment.	USA	Affirmative action can motivate greater academic effort among underrepresented students.	Educational discouragement due to perceived barriers.	Policy design that motivates effort and participation.
Deshpande (2019)	Investigate stigma effects on affirmative action beneficiaries.	Sociological analysis and review of existing literature.	India	Stigma exists but doesn't outweigh the social and economic benefits of affirmative action.	Stigma, social labeling, and discrimination.	Public awareness and inclusive education narratives.
French (2021)	Compare affirmative action in Brazil and the USA.	Historical and legal comparative analysis.	Brazil & USA	Brazil's affirmative action has broader support and implementation than the U.S.	Colonial histories, systemic racism.	Constitutional policies, race-conscious programs.
Gandhari (2021)	Examine equity in Nepalese higher education.	Descriptive qualitative study.	Nepal	Equity is compromised by socio-economic and regional disparities.	Geographic remoteness, poverty, caste/ethnicity-based exclusion.	Scholarships, quota systems, targeted outreach.
Garaz (2014)	Evaluate the effectiveness of affirmative action for Roma students.	Case studies and interviews.	Europe (e.g., Slovakia, Hungary)	Affirmative action often favors elite segments within marginalized communities.	Internal stratification within marginalized groups, policy misalignment.	Inclusive, needs-based affirmative action.
Gorman-Huang & Huang (2023)	Explore strategies for equitable access post-affirmative action in the	Policy commentary and theoretical framework.	USA	Need to replace race-conscious policies with	Institutional racism, legal constraints.	Geographic targeting, socio-economic indicators.

	U.S.			equity-focused alternatives.		
Gururaj et al. (2021)	Examine inclusion/exclusion in global affirmative action policies.	Comparative literature review.	Global	Affirmative action varies across contexts but faces global resistance.	Colonialism, market-driven education systems.	Context-specific inclusive policies.
Hussain (2023)	Evaluate Canadian policy efforts on racism in higher education.	Policy analysis.	Canada	Efforts exist but lack enforcement and consistency.	Colonial legacy, underfunded institutions.	Legislation, equity audits, targeted supports.
Mello (2022)	Assess centralized admissions and affirmative action on low-income access.	Quantitative analysis of admissions data.	Brazil	Centralized systems increase access for low-income students.	Income disparity, decentralized processes.	Centralized admissions, income-based quotas.
Petts (2022)	Analyze public attitudes toward affirmative action.	Sociological survey and statistical analysis.	USA	Support varies by political ideology and education level.	Public misunderstanding, politicization.	Public education campaigns, transparency.
Ramaleka na (2022)	Critique stigma against affirmative action in South Africa.	Theoretical critique and social analysis.	South Africa	Stigma is used to delegitimize equity efforts.	Race based discourse, post-apartheid inequality.	Narrative shift, decolonized frameworks.
Sunam et al. (2022)	Evaluate meritocratic inclusion of marginalized in Nepal's bureaucracy.	Mixed methods (surveys + policy review).	Nepal	Affirmative action fosters both merit and representation.	Caste-based exclusion, rural-urban gaps.	Meritocratic inclusion via quotas.
Teshome (2024a)	Systematic review of affirmative action use in higher education.	Systematic literature review.	Global	AA remains a global equity tool with variable implementation.	Policy gaps, resource disparities.	Policy harmonization and support structures.
Teshome (2024b)	Review literature on affirmative action in education.	Systematic literature review.	Global	AA is effective but must be context-sensitive.	Underrepresentation, legacy systems.	Data-driven policy refinement.
Zeidan	Evaluate racial	Quantitative	Brazil	AA	Historical	Dual-target

(2023)	and income-based AA in Brazil.	and policy analysis.		improved diversity without undermining quality.	exclusion, income gaps.	quotas, inclusive admissions.

Thematic Analysis
Affirmative action (AA) policies in higher education aim to rectify systemic inequalities by providing targeted support to historically marginalized groups. This thematic analysis synthesizes findings from 20 global studies to identify key causes of systemic disparities and mechanisms for addressing them.

Causes of Systemic Inequalities in Higher Education
A. Historical and Structural Discrimination
Education isn't just about what happens in the classroom—it's deeply shaped by history, culture, and systems that have long excluded certain groups. For example:

Caste and Race-Based Exclusion (Agarwal, 2023; Deshpande, 2019; French, 2021):
In India, generations of discrimination based on caste continue to affect access to education today. Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) often face invisible but powerful barriers, even when policies like reservations exist. Similarly, in Brazil and the U.S., historical injustices—like slavery and segregation—still shape who gets into top universities and who doesn't. These are not just old wounds—they're still affecting lives today.

Colonial Legacies (Hussain, 2023; Gururaj et al., 2021):
Countries like Canada and South Africa inherited educational systems built by colonial powers, which were never designed to include Indigenous or Black populations. As a result, many students from these communities still struggle to see themselves represented in curricula, faculty, or leadership roles.

Economic Stratification (Mello, 2022; Zeidan, 2023):
Money plays a huge role in who gets to go to college. In places like Brazil and Nepal, low-income students often can't afford tuition, books, or transportation—even if they qualify academically. Without support, financial hardship becomes a wall between them and their dreams.

B. Institutional and Policy Barriers
Even when students are qualified, institutions and policies sometimes make it harder for them to succeed.

Admission Biases (Blume & Long, 2014; Baker, 2019):
In the U.S., some states have banned race-conscious admissions policies. While framed as neutral, these bans have made it harder for Black and Latino students to get into selective colleges. It shows how policies can unintentionally favor some while leaving others behind.

Geographic Disparities (Gandhari, 2021; Sunam et al., 2022):
In countries like Nepal, most universities are located in cities. That leaves rural students at a disadvantage—not only because they have fewer schools nearby, but also because they may lack internet, transportation, or even awareness of opportunities.

Stigma and Stereotyping (Ramalekana, 2022; Deshpande, 2019):
Even when students gain admission through affirmative action, they often face stereotypes and stigma. Some feel like they have to prove they belong, battling internal and external doubts. This emotional burden makes learning and fitting in much harder than it should be.

C. Political and Ideological Resistance
Affirmative action is often caught in political debates, where ideology can outweigh facts.

Legal Restrictions (Gorman-Huang & Huang, 2023; Petts, 2022):
In the U.S., recent Supreme Court rulings have weakened affirmative action, making it harder for universities to consider race in admissions. Public opinion is divided—some people believe AA helps level the playing field, while others see it as unfair.

Misaligned Implementation (Garaz, 2014; Barham et al., 2023):
In Europe, some affirmative action programs end up helping only the most privileged within marginalized groups—like Roma students from wealthier families—while poorer ones still miss out. This shows that having good intentions isn't enough; policies need to be carefully designed and monitored to reach those who need them most.

Mechanisms to Address Systemic Inequalities
A. Quota Systems and Targeted Admissions

One of the most common tools used globally is setting aside spots for underrepresented groups.

Caste-Based Quotas (Bhattacharjee, 2019; Agarwal, 2023):
In India, quotas for OBCs have helped more students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds enter higher education. These policies aren't perfect, but they've started shifting the landscape toward greater inclusion.

Race-Conscious Policies (French, 2021; Zeidan, 2023):
Brazil has been more successful than the U.S. in using race-conscious admissions, especially by combining race with income in their quotas. This approach has increased diversity without lowering academic standards—a sign that well-designed policies can work.

B. Holistic and Alternative Admissions Strategies
Some universities are finding new ways to promote equity without relying solely on standardized tests or race.

Class-Based Alternatives (Blume & Long, 2014; Gorman-Huang & Huang, 2023):
After affirmative action bans, U.S. universities began using socio-economic factors—like family income or school resources—to identify promising students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Centralized Admissions (Mello, 2022):
Brazil's national system for university admissions has made the process fairer by reducing bias and giving more low-income students a chance to get into college.

C. Supportive Interventions Beyond Admissions
Getting in is just the first step. Once students are enrolled, they need ongoing help to stay and thrive.

Scholarships and Outreach (Gandhari, 2021; Hussain, 2023):
In Nepal and Canada, scholarships, mentorship, and outreach programs have helped students from rural areas and Indigenous communities succeed once they're in college.

Public Awareness Campaigns (Petts, 2022; Ramalekana, 2022):
Changing public perception is key. When people understand why affirmative action exists—and see its positive impact—it builds broader support. Campaigns that challenge myths and share success stories help reduce stigma and create a more inclusive environment.

D. Policy Harmonization and Long-Term Inclusion
For affirmative action to truly make a difference, it needs to be part of a larger, sustainable strategy.

Global Best Practices (Teshome, 2024a; Barham et al., 2023):
Countries like New Zealand have created successful models—such as targeted health education programs for Māori communities—that show how culturally relevant, community-driven policies can lead to lasting change.

Equity Audits and Legislation (Hussain, 2023):
In Canada, proposals for equity audits aim to hold institutions accountable for improving diversity and inclusion. By regularly checking progress and adjusting course, universities can ensure that policies don't just look good on paper—they actually work in practice.

By understanding both the causes of inequality and the tools available to address them, we can begin to build higher education systems that are truly open to everyone—regardless of where they come from, what they look like, or how much money they have.

Discussion

Affirmative action (AA) in higher education is like a bridge—it's meant to help people cross over obstacles that have kept them out of college for too long. These barriers come in many forms: caste, race, income, geography, and even outdated systems from the past. Around the world, countries are trying different ways to build these bridges, with varying levels of success.

One thing we've learned from recent research is that inequality doesn't just disappear because a policy exists. In India, for example, caste still plays a big role in who gets into good schools—even though reservation policies have been around for decades. Similarly, in the U.S., legal battles over race-conscious admissions show how fragile progress can be when political

winds shift. Brazil offers a different but related story—where racial exclusion and economic inequality are tightly linked, requiring policies that consider both factors together.
This tells us that AA needs to be more than just a checklist. It must take into account intersectionality—the idea that people often face multiple disadvantages at once. Someone might be poor, rural, and from a historically marginalized group all at the same time. Policies need to reflect that complexity if they're going to make a real difference.

Even when policies look good on paper, implementation often falls short. In Europe, affirmative action meant to support Roma students sometimes ends up benefiting only the most privileged within that group, leaving others behind. In South Africa, stigma still clouds public perception of AA, making it harder to sustain meaningful change. On the other hand, success stories like Brazil's centralized admissions system and India's spillover effects—where benefits extend beyond the intended groups—show what's possible when policies are well-designed and thoughtfully executed.

Political resistance remains another major hurdle. In the U.S., state-level bans on AA have rolled back diversity efforts, especially at selective institutions. This highlights the need to not only defend existing policies but also find new ways to promote equity when traditional tools are taken away. Public attitudes matter too—support for AA varies widely depending on political views, education levels, and personal experiences. That's why awareness campaigns, storytelling, and honest conversations about fairness, merit, and justice are so important in building public support.

Looking ahead, there are several key directions for improving affirmative action:

1. Think intersectionally: Recognize that people don't live single-issue lives. Design policies that address overlapping identities and disadvantages.
2. Enforce policies better: Good intentions aren't enough—monitoring and accountability are essential to ensure policies reach the right people.
3. Go beyond admissions: Scholarships, mentorship programs, and campus support systems are just as important as getting into college in the first place.
4. Use data wisely: Let evidence guide decisions. Regular reviews and data-driven policy adjustments help keep policies relevant and effective.

5. Conclusion:-

The conversation around AA is far from over—but with better understanding, smarter design, and deeper commitment, we can build education systems that truly serve everyone. In the end, affirmative action isn't a perfect solution—but it's a necessary one. It plays a critical role in addressing systemic inequities in higher education, though its success depends heavily on context, political will, and the presence of supportive systems. As we move forward, researchers and policymakers alike should pay more attention to non-Western experiences and invest in long-term studies that track how these policies affect students' lives over time.

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