A systematic review of the nature and use of affirmative action in higher education

Una revisione sistematica della natura e dell'uso dell'azione affermativa nell'istruzione superiore

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Abstract

Affirmative action policies in higher education play a pivotal role in addressing historical inequalities, fostering diversity, and promoting equitable access to academic opportunities. These policies target marginalized groups, such as racial minorities and economically disadvantaged populations, aiming to mitigate systemic barriers and enhance inclusion within higher education institutions globally. This manuscript provides a systematic review of affirmative action in higher education, synthesizing research conducted between 2014 and 2023. It explores the origins, motivations, implementation strategies, and outcomes of these policies while addressing the arguments for and against their use. The review draws upon studies from diverse regions, including the United States, Brazil, India, and South Africa, to offer a comprehensive understanding of how affirmative action operates within varied socio-political and educational contexts. Adhering to the PRISMA methodology, the study systematically selected 15 peer-reviewed articles from reputable databases such as ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Wiley. The findings highlight the transformative potential of affirmative action in increasing access and success for underrepresented groups while also acknowledging the controversies it generates, particularly regarding meritocracy, fairness, and societal perceptions. This review contributes to the discourse on equity and inclusion in higher education by identifying existing research gaps and proposing directions for future studies. It underscores the importance of affirmative action as a tool for fostering social mobility and creating an educational landscape that values diversity and addresses structural inequities.

Keywords: Affirmative Action, Discrimination, Equity, Higher Education.

Riassunto

Le politiche di azione affermativa nell'istruzione superiore svolgono un ruolo fondamentale nell'affrontare le disuguaglianze storiche, promuovere la diversità e un accesso equo alle opportunità accademiche. Queste politiche hanno come obiettivo gruppi emarginati, come le minoranze razziali e le popolazioni economicamente svantaggiate, e mira ad attenuare le barriere sistemiche e migliorare l'inclusione all'interno degli istituti di istruzione superiore a livello globale. Il manoscritto fornisce una revisione sistematica dell'azione affermativa nell'istruzione superiore, sintetizzando la ricerca condotta tra il 2014 e il 2023. Esplora le origini, le motivazioni, le strategie di implementazione e i risultati di queste politiche, affrontando al contempo gli argomenti a favore e contro il loro utilizzo. La revisione attinge a studi provenienti da diverse regioni, tra cui Stati Uniti, Brasile, India e Sudafrica, per offrire una comprensione completa di come l'azione affermativa opera in vari contesti socio-politici ed educativi. Aderendo alla metodologia PRISMA, lo studio ha selezionato sistematicamente 15 articoli sottoposti a revisione paritaria da database affidabili come ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR e Wiley. I risultati evidenziano il potenziale trasformativo dell'azione affermativa nell'aumentare l'accesso e il successo per i gruppi sottorappresentati, riconoscendo al contempo le controversie che genera, in particolare per quanto riguarda meritocrazia, equità e percezioni sociali. Questa revisione contribuisce al discorso sull'equità e l'inclusione nell'istruzione superiore identificando le lacune di ricerca esistenti e proponendo direzioni per studi futuri. Sottolinea l'importanza dell'azione affermativa come strumento per promuovere la mobilità sociale e creare un panorama educativo che valorizzi la diversità e affronti le disuguaglianze strutturali.

Parole chiave: Azione affermativa, Discriminazione, Equità, Istruzione superiore.

1. Introduction

Affirmative action in higher education is a critical mechanism for addressing historical injustices, promoting diversity, and ensuring equitable access to academic opportunities for underrepresented and marginalized groups globally. These policies are designed to rectify disparities that have been perpetuated by systemic barriers related to race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status, aiming to foster greater social inclusion and provide equal educational opportunities. As (Petts, 2022) notes, affirmative action seeks to promote equity and access by giving special consideration to historically marginalized groups, including racial minorities, ensuring they are represented and supported within academic institutions. These policies, which exist in various forms around the world, aim not only to enhance demographic diversity but also to address broader inequalities in education, employment, and public life.

Affirmative action policies in the United States, for instance, evolved from the Civil Rights Movement, where race-based affirmative action was first mandated by the Kennedy administration in the 1960s (Katznelson, 2005). Over time, the scope of these policies expanded to include women and other minorities, while also becoming more institutionalized in areas like hiring, procurement, and education (Crosby et al., 2003). However, in the 1990s, following a series of legal challenges and public initiatives, there was a shift away from «hard» affirmative action measures like quotas, leading to a focus on higher education admissions as the central battleground for these policies. As (Sunam et al., 2022) highlights, affirmative action aims to strike a balance between ensuring equal protection under the law and addressing the lingering effects of past discrimination, all while fostering diversity in academic institutions. Despite its benefits, affirmative action remains a contentious issue, with critics arguing that it undermines meritocracy, fosters reverse discrimination, and perpetuates stereotypes about the abilities of minority students (Gururaj et al., 2021; Meyer, 2017).

Outside the United States, affirmative action policies are similarly aimed at promoting access and diversity, though they take different forms. In Canada, policies focus on improving the representation of Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities in higher education, while in India, caste-based quotas are implemented through reservation laws that aim to address historical discrimination against Dalits and Adivasis. Other countries, including Malaysia and Northern Ireland, have adopted affirmative action to tackle ethnic and religious disparities in education (Cotton et al., 2014). These global examples show that while the implementation of affirmative action may differ, the core goal of promoting equity and social inclusion remains consistent. Affirmative action strategies range from outreach and recruitment initiatives to targeted training, investment, and specific goals for student enrollment, ensuring that marginalized groups are not overlooked in the admissions process (Zamani-Gallaher et al., 2023).

However, the debate over affirmative action continues to intensify, with some arguing that these policies are no longer necessary and may even be counterproductive. Critics contend that affirmative action can result in lowered academic standards, diminished student ambition, and the reinforcement of racial and gender stereotypes, suggesting that beneficiaries of such policies may be perceived as less deserving of their academic achievements (Garrison-Wade & Lewis, 2004). Despite these criticisms, affirmative action remains an essential tool for addressing systemic inequalities in education, and its continued use and adaptation are crucial for ensuring a more inclusive and diverse higher education system.

The purpose of this manuscript is to conduct a systematic literature review to provide a comprehensive understanding of the nature and impact of affirmative action policies in higher education, exploring both their benefits and the challenges they face.

2. Methods

2.1 Study Design and Procedures

A systematic literature review was used for this study. A systematic literature review is a review of the research literature using systematic and explicit accountable methods (Gouch et al., 2012). A more elaborated definition of systematic literature review is provided by Petticrew and Roberts (2006) as follows: «Systematic reviews are literature reviews that adhere closely to a set of scientific methods that explicitly aim to

limit systematic error (bias), mainly by attempting to identify, appraise, and synthesize all relevant studies (of whatever design) in order to answer a particular question (or set of questions)». The review process was guided by the following research questions: Why and how is affirmative action practiced in higher education? What are the arguments against affirmative action in higher education? What are the effects of affirmative action in higher education? What research methodologies are utilized in affirmative action literature? What is the future of affirmative action research in higher education?

The review encompassed 15 papers that were gathered from different databases—ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Willey. The paper was prepared in the following steps: planning, protocol, extraction, analysis, and reporting stages. This systematic review followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) criteria. The researcher used Zotero for reference management, and a check was made as to the correctness of the referencing by Zotero. This study is limited by its reliance on English-language publications, potentially excluding relevant research in other languages. Additionally, while the inclusion of studies from 2014 to 2023 ensures a focus on contemporary issues, some earlier influential works may be omitted.

2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The paper focused on affirmative action in higher education and was published between 2014 and 2023. The paper is excluded if it is written in a language other than English, a paper published in a conference, a paper published as a book chapter, a paper published in predator journals, or a gray paper.

2.3 Quality Assessment

The following factors were considered as eligibility criteria in selecting the papers: Are the research goals clearly stated, are the papers peer-reviewed, and are the papers full-text, and are the contents accessible?

2.4 Search Strategy and Source of Information

Search terms were formulated and applied to the online databases. Key terms were developed using various Boolean operators, such as «AND» and «OR.» The following search terms were used: "Affirmative Actions". OR "Equal Rights Policy". OR "Anti-discrimination", OR "Positive Affirmative Action" AND "Higher Education", OR "Universities", OR "Colleges", OR "Tertiary Education", «Race-Based Quotas» OR «Income-Based Quotas» AND «College Admissions», «Affirmative Action» AND «Marginalized Groups», «Critiques of Affirmative Action» AND «Meritocracy in Education».

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Identification of studies via databases

Identification

Journal Articles Identified
ERIC (n=12)
Google Scholar (n=38)
JSTOR (n=19)
Willey (n=11)

Screening

Journal Articles screened by looking at their titles, abstracts and key words (n=80)

Journal Articles excluded after reading their titles and abstracts (n=64)

Reports assessed for eligibility (n =16)

Reports excluded Articles not on higher Education (n =1)

Included

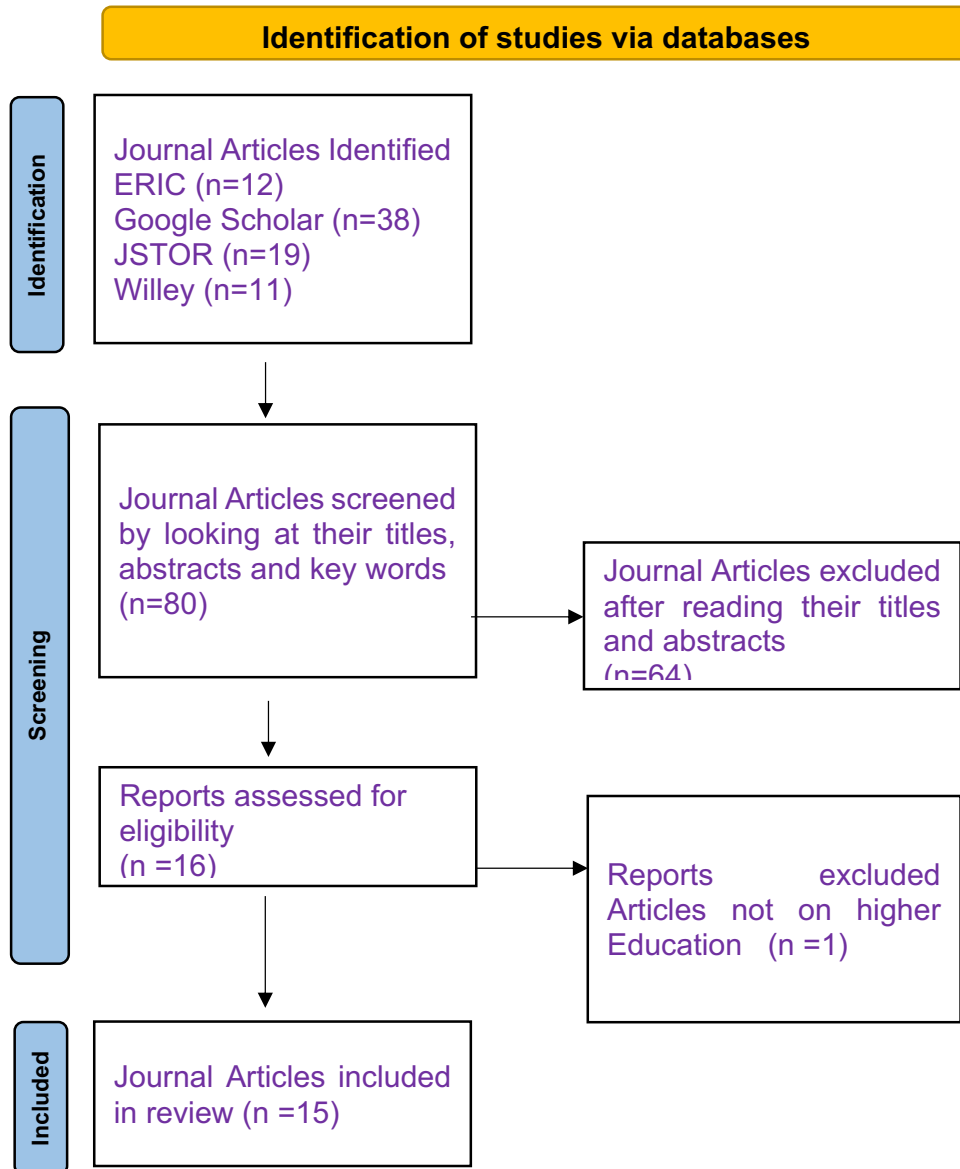Journal Articles included in review (n =15)

Fig.1: Search strategy

The graph next page shows the distribution of the articles by country. Four (4) of the studies were from Brazil, three (3) of them were from the USA, three (3) of them were from India, two (2) of them were from Nepal, and one (1) each from Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa.

JOURNAL ARTICLES COUNTRY WISE

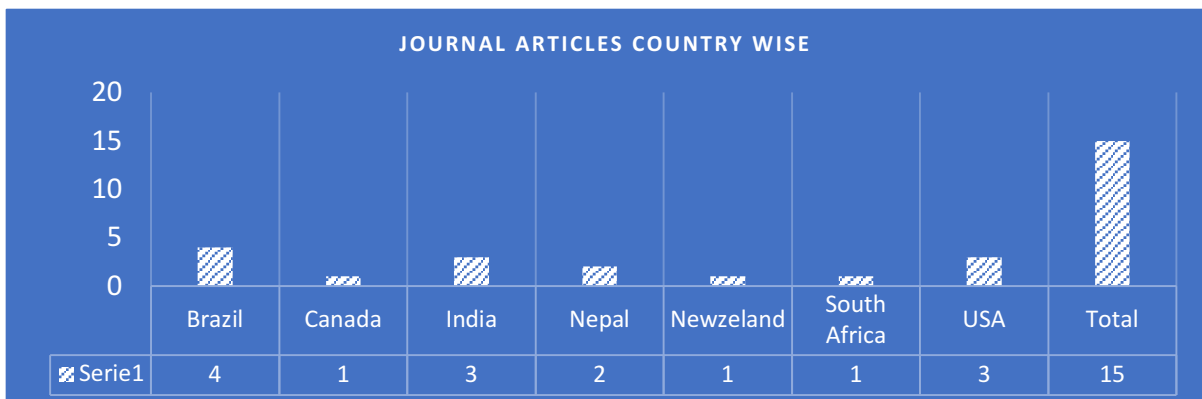|	Brazil	Canada	India	Nepal	Newzeland	South Africa	USA	Total
Serie1	4	1	3	2	1	1	3	15

Fig.2. Articles by country

The line graph below shows publications year wise that were included in the systematic literature review. Six (6) of the articles were published in 2019, two (2) articles in year 2021, another four (4) articles in year 2022, and the remaining three (3) articles in 2023.
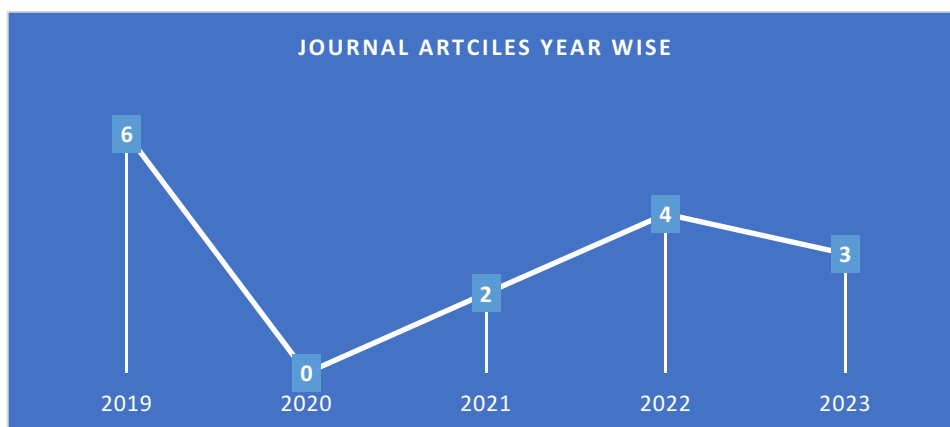

JOURNAL ARTCILES YEAR WISE

Fig.3: Articles year wise

3. Results

In this section of the paper the researcher reports the findings of the systematic literature review in the form of answers to the research questions.

3.1 Justification for and mechanisms of providing affirmative action in higher education (Why and how is affirmative action practiced in higher education?

Researchers in the study of affirmative action provided various reasons for providing affirmative action in higher education. The educational opportunities for disadvantaged people help them to break the vicious cycle of poverty, marginalization, and discrimination by enabling them to improve their social and economic status (Gandhari, 2019), to promote equity and access for minority and historically discriminated subgroups who wish to participate in tertiary education (Gururaj et al., 2021), and it is intended to increase access to education for the marginalized sections (Kumar & Singh, n.d.). The following mechanisms of providing affirmative action in higher education were also given by the researchers in the study. Reserve (Cotton et al., 2014), percent plans, which guarantee admission to top high school students, and holistic review, in which applications are evaluated on a comprehensive set of merits (Hussain, 2023), Quota (Mello, 2022; Cassan, 2019) and income and racial-based quotas and income and racial-based quotas (Bleemer, 2019).

3.2 Arguments against affirmative action in higher education (What are the arguments against affirmative action in higher education?)

Affirmative action is a controversial issue in higher education. Opponents of affirmative action have argued that it results in preferential treatment, impermissible quotas, and reverse discrimination (Gururaj et al., 2021). Legal challenges to affirmative action have been common in some overseas jurisdictions and have resulted in some instances in weaker, or absent, affirmative action (Barham et al., 2023). Affirmative Action (AA) policies aim to provide or increase access to preferred jobs or seats in educational institutions to individuals who would not have been selected otherwise. The policy is meant to benefit designated social groups, such as racial, religious, or ethnic minorities, or lower ranked caste groups who are socially stigmatized on account of their group identity. However, an unintended consequence of AA might be that it harms the very beneficiaries it aims to help by further stigmatizing them as incompetent, on account of

the fact that they would not have gained entry in the absence of AA (Deshpande, 2019). One of the arguments against affirmative action is that it causes internal and external stigma towards its actual or perceived beneficiaries (Ramalekana, 2022). One of the key criticisms of such policies is that they undermine meritocratic principles (Sunam et al., 2022).

3.3 The Effects of Affirmative Action in Higher Education (What are the effects of affirmative action in higher education?)

Research on the effects of affirmative action in higher education has resulted in mixed outcomes. This affirmative action policy also had a significant spillover effect on high-school completion rates and school enrollments in higher grades (Bhattacharjee, 2019). Affirmative action policies have changed the educational attainment of the average scheduled Caste population (Cassan, 2019). Affirmative Action increases study effort and exam performance for the majority of disadvantaged students targeted by the policy (Cotton et.al, 2022). Despite the constitutional commitment to provide equitable opportunities for educational development, Dalits who comprise above 13% population have been facing multitudes of exclusion in HE opportunities (Gandhari, 2019). The educational attainment of black children has improved but the translation of that education into jobs has not—South Africa. Increased years of schooling for non-Whites-Brazil. Educational affirmative action in India has benefited a small segment of the target groups, the creamy layers of the Dalit and Adivasi population. In USA affirmative action has increased access to higher education but did not contribute to social movability (Gururaj et al., 2021). The reservation policy was formulated to bring equity among different social groups but it has created inequality within the social groups which was not expected (Kumar & Singh, n.d.). Affirmative Action increased enrollment of disadvantaged students to elite institutions (Mello, 2019). Affirmative Action led to an increase in the enrollment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in Brazilian universities (Viera & Arends-Kuenming, 2019). Affirmative action improves the outcomes of targeted students. Specifically, race-based quotas raise the share of Black students in federal universities, an effect not observed with income-based quotas alone. The results suggest that income and race-based quotas beneficiaries experience substantial long-term welfare benefits. There is no evidence of mismatching or negative consequences for targeted students' peers (Zeidan, 2023). (Vieira & Arends-Kuenning, 2019)

3.4. Research Methodologies of Affirmative Action in Higher Education (What research methodologies were utilized in affirmative action literature?)

Researchers in the study of affirmative action in higher education utilized various research methods. The table below provides a summary of the methodologies, objectives, and results of each study on affirmative action.

Study	Methodology Used	Objectives of the Study	Results Achieved
Cassan (2019)	Empirical	To study the impact of India's affirmative action policies for scheduled Castes on educational attainment.	Identified significant educational attainment improvements for the scheduled Caste population due to affirmative action policies.
(Vieira & Arends-Kuenning, 2019)	Case Study	To investigate how affirmative action for college admission affected enrollment of disadvantaged students in Brazil.	Found an increase in the enrollment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in Brazilian universities due to affirmative action policies.
Bhattacharjee (2019)	Empirical	To examine whether affirmative action in India incentivizes high-school completion and higher education enrollment.	Affirmative action had a spillover effect, improving high-school completion rates and encouraging higher education enrollment.
Cotton, Hickman & Price (2014)	Experimental	To measure the impact of affirmative action on the academic performance of disadvantaged students.	Increased study efforts and improved exam performance among students from disadvantaged backgrounds targeted by affirmative action policies.

Study	Methodology Used	Objectives of the Study	Results Achieved
Sunam et al. (2022)	Case Study Review	To explore the impact of affirmative action on the Nepalese civil service, focusing on meritocracy and productivity.	Argued that affirmative action in Nepal's civil service erodes meritocracy but offers inclusion for marginalized groups, although with mixed effects on productivity.
Bleemer (2019)	Empirical	To assess the effectiveness of race-based and income-based quotas in college admissions.	Found that race-based quotas led to significant increases in diversity without mismatching students, while income-based quotas had limited effects.
Gandhari (2019)	Review Paper	To analyze the caste-based affirmative action system in Nepal and its impact on Dalit students' access to higher education.	Highlighted the challenges faced by Dalit students in accessing quality education, despite affirmative action policies.
Hussain (2023)	Review Paper	To evaluate equity initiatives in higher education institutions in Canada.	Identified policies in Canadian universities that aim to promote greater inclusion of ethnic minorities, with varying levels of success.
Kumar & Singh (n.d.)	Review Paper	To analyze reservation policies in India and their future perspectives.	Provided insights into the limitations and successes of reservation policies in expanding access to education for marginalized groups in India.
Mello (2022)	Cross-sectional Study	To assess the impact of affirmative action on college enrollment in Brazil.	Found that affirmative action policies significantly increased college enrollment rates among underrepresented groups in Brazil.
Zeidan (2023)	Survey	To investigate the future of affirmative action and its implementation methods in Brazil.	Concluded that affirmative action policies in Brazil have substantial long-term welfare benefits for underrepresented groups, with no negative impact on peers.
Barham, Baxter & Crampton (2023)	Survey	To examine the legal challenges and implementation methods of affirmative action globally.	Provided examples of legal challenges to affirmative action and discussed alternative implementation methods across various global contexts.

Tab.1: Summary of the methodologies, objectives, and results achieved

3.5. Future Affirmative Action Research in Higher Education (What is the future of affirmative action research in higher education?)

The systematic literature review conducted showed that there are still gaps in affirmative action research in higher education. To this effect, the following research areas were identified: Understanding the impact on students' performance and attainment and consequently on their later labor market outcomes is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of the overall and lasting impacts of Affirmative Action (Mello, 2022). Future research on the graduation rates of beneficiaries, the impact of college access on labor market earnings, and the overall effects of the policy on economic inequality is recommended (Viera & Arends-Kuenming, 2019). Therefore, future research on affirmative action should focus on its long-term impacts on academic performance, graduation rates, and labor market outcomes to assess its effectiveness in promoting social mobility and reducing economic disparities. Additionally, studies should explore alternative strategies such as income-based affirmative action, holistic admissions processes, and outreach programs, evaluating their potential to achieve diversity and equity without the criticisms often associated with race-based quotas. Research on the overlapping disadvantages faced by marginalized groups, such as those related to race, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status, is also essential to develop more inclusive policies that address multiple forms of disadvantage. Comparative analyses across countries with

diverse cultural and legal contexts can provide valuable insights into best practices and innovative approaches to affirmative action. Finally, examining the legal and political challenges to affirmative action policies and their implications for future implementation is critical for ensuring the sustainability of these efforts in advancing equity and inclusion in higher education.

4. Discussion

In the study, disadvantaged groups in the countries covered are defined by various socio-political and historical contexts. In Brazil, the primary focus is on racial minorities, particularly Afro-Brazilians, and low-income individuals who face systemic racism and poverty, hindering their access to higher education. In Canada, affirmative action policies target ethnic minorities, Indigenous peoples, and economically disadvantaged groups, aiming to rectify historical exclusion and discrimination, especially toward Indigenous communities. India's affirmative action is centered around caste-based quotas, benefiting Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis), aiming to alleviate centuries of caste-based discrimination and promote access to higher education for economically disadvantaged communities. Similarly, in Nepal, Dalits and Indigenous communities are the main beneficiaries of affirmative action policies, which seek to address ethnic and caste-based discrimination, although there are concerns regarding the policy's effect on meritocracy. In New Zealand, the focus is on Indigenous Maori and Pacific peoples, who experience systemic disparities in education and employment, with policies designed to increase their representation in higher education. In South Africa, affirmative action addresses racial inequities, particularly for Black South Africans, aiming to reverse the historical injustices of apartheid and increase access to educational opportunities. Finally, in the USA, affirmative action policies primarily support racial minorities, including African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans, along with economically disadvantaged individuals, targeting the long-standing issues of racial segregation and socio-economic inequities that have shaped higher education access. Each country's affirmative action policies are shaped by its unique historical and socio-political challenges, reflecting a broad range of marginalized groups striving for more equitable educational opportunities.

Affirmative action in higher education has been a cornerstone policy in addressing historical inequalities and promoting social inclusion. This systematic review reveals a complex and multifaceted picture of affirmative action policies, highlighting both their positive impacts and the controversies they generate. Through a detailed analysis of 15 studies from diverse global contexts, the review offers insights into the motivations for implementing affirmative action, the mechanisms employed, and the varied outcomes of these policies.

One of the key findings from this review is that affirmative action continues to be a crucial tool in increasing access to higher education for marginalized groups, including racial and ethnic minorities, economically disadvantaged populations, and women. In countries like India, Brazil, and the United States, affirmative action has played a significant role in increasing enrollment rates for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Studies by Viera & Arends-Kuenming (2019) and Mello (2022) show that race-based quotas and other affirmative action strategies led to higher college enrollment rates among underrepresented groups, fostering greater diversity in academic institutions. Similarly et al. (2022) found that affirmative action policies led to increased academic efforts and improved exam performance among disadvantaged students.

However, the impact of affirmative action extends beyond enrollment. As highlighted by Bhattacharjee (2019), affirmative action policies in India have not only increased access to higher education but have also had a spillover effect, improving high-school completion rates and encouraging further academic attainment. This suggests that affirmative action in higher education can have broader societal benefits, addressing issues of educational inequality at multiple levels. Furthermore, research by Zeidan (2023) indicates that affirmative action in Brazil has led to long-term welfare benefits for students from marginalized groups, contributing to social mobility and economic equality.

Despite the positive outcomes, the review also reveals significant criticisms and challenges associated with affirmative action. Opponents of the policy argue that it leads to reverse discrimination, undermines meritocracy, and creates new forms of inequality. For example, studies such as Sunam et al. (2022) have

raised concerns about the erosion of meritocracy, particularly in countries like Nepal, where affirmative action is seen as compromising productivity and fairness in the civil service. Critics also argue that affirmative action policies can stigmatize beneficiaries, who may be perceived as less qualified or deserving of their positions, a concern raised by Deshpande (2019) and Ramalekena (2022). This stigma could undermine the achievements of marginalized students, casting doubt on their capabilities despite their academic success.

Another important theme that emerged from the studies is the need for a nuanced understanding of affirmative action policies. The review highlights the diversity of affirmative action strategies employed across different contexts, ranging from race-based quotas and income-based quotas to holistic admissions and outreach programs. For instance, studies by Cassan (2019) and Bleemer (2019) show that a combination of race-based and income-based quotas can yield better outcomes in terms of increased access and success for marginalized groups. These mixed strategies allow institutions to balance the need for diversity with the goal of providing opportunities to economically disadvantaged students who may not belong to traditionally underrepresented racial groups.

Furthermore, while affirmative action policies have been instrumental in increasing diversity in higher education, they have not fully addressed the broader societal inequalities that these policies aim to remedy. Issues such as caste-based discrimination in India, as discussed by Gandhari (2019), or the persistent socio-economic inequalities in countries like South Africa, continue to limit the effectiveness of affirmative action in achieving long-term social mobility. In this regard, future research must focus not only on the academic outcomes of affirmative action but also on its broader impacts on labor market outcomes, earnings, and overall social integration.

The future of affirmative action is uncertain, especially in light of ongoing legal and political challenges. In the United States, for example, the legal landscape surrounding affirmative action in college admissions has evolved dramatically in recent decades, with multiple court rulings challenging the constitutionality of race-based admissions policies. As discussed by (Baker, 2019) and (Meyer, 2017)Meyer (2018), such rulings could lead to a rollback of affirmative action policies, potentially undermining the progress made in increasing diversity and inclusion in higher education. Similar legal challenges are being observed in countries like Brazil, where the use of race-based quotas continues to face opposition.

Given these challenges, future research on affirmative action in higher education should focus on several key areas. First, there is a need to explore the long-term impact of affirmative action on the academic performance and social mobility of beneficiaries, particularly in terms of labor market outcomes. As noted by Mello (2022) and Viera & Arends-Kuenming (2019), understanding how affirmative action influences employment opportunities, wages, and career advancement is crucial for assessing its broader societal impact. Second, more research is needed on the effectiveness of alternative affirmative action strategies, such as income-based quotas and outreach programs, in promoting diversity and inclusion without the potential downsides associated with race-based quotas. Lastly, future studies should examine the intersectionality of affirmative action, considering how factors such as gender, disability, and other forms of marginalization affect the success of these policies.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions

Affirmative action remains a vital policy tool for addressing historical inequalities and promoting diversity and inclusion in higher education. This systematic review highlights the significant role affirmative action has played in increasing access to education for marginalized groups, including racial minorities, economically disadvantaged populations, and women, across various global contexts. From race-based quotas in Brazil and the United States to caste-based reservations in India and Indigenous-focused policies in Canada, affirmative action has helped bridge gaps in representation and opportunity. The findings demonstrate that while affirmative action has improved enrollment and academic performance for disadvantaged groups, its impacts on long-term outcomes such as career advancement and social mobility require further exploration.

Despite its benefits, affirmative action faces ongoing debates and challenges. Critics argue that it undermines meritocracy, perpetuates reverse discrimination, and can stigmatize beneficiaries. These concerns,

coupled with evolving legal and political landscapes, highlight the need for innovative approaches to affirmative action. Future research must address these issues by evaluating the effectiveness of alternative strategies, such as income-based quotas and holistic admissions processes, and exploring the intersection of multiple forms of disadvantage. By refining affirmative action policies and ensuring they are adaptable to diverse contexts, higher education systems can continue to promote equity and foster inclusive learning environments that benefit individuals, institutions, and society as a whole.

To enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of affirmative action policies in higher education, institutions and policymakers should adopt a multifaceted approach that addresses both current challenges and future needs. This includes expanding research into alternative strategies such as income-based quotas, outreach programs, and holistic admissions processes to complement or replace race-based measures where appropriate. Policies should also consider multiple dimensions of disadvantage, including gender, disability, and socioeconomic status, to ensure a more inclusive and equitable framework. Furthermore, efforts should be made to monitor and evaluate the long-term impacts of affirmative action on academic performance, graduation rates, and labor market outcomes, ensuring that these policies translate into meaningful social mobility. Finally, higher education institutions should engage in proactive dialogue with stakeholders, including students, educators, and legal experts, to adapt affirmative action policies to evolving societal and legal contexts while maintaining their core focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

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