

Affirmative Action in Education and Public Employment: A Global Systematic Review (2015-2025)

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ABSTRACT

This review paper synthesises scholarship published between 2015 and 2025, drawing on 96 studies indexed through Web of Science and Scopus across education, sociology, law, public policy, economics, and allied disciplines. Using a PRISMA-guided systematic review and bibliometric approach, the study examines the evolving global discourse on affirmative action across higher education and public employment systems. The review maps conceptual distinctions between equality and equity, compares policy instruments and governance frameworks across the United States, Brazil, India, South Africa, Malaysia, Nigeria, China, and selected European contexts, and analyses methodological trends spanning quasi-experimental, qualitative, ethnographic, bibliometric, and mixed-methods designs. Bibliometric visualisations, including thematic maps, keyword co-occurrence networks, analyses of country scientific production, and collaboration mapping, reveal major thematic clusters centred on diversity and inclusion, social justice and redistribution, public employment and labour-market mobility, intersectionality, and institutional governance. The findings indicate that well-designed affirmative action policies, when supported by transparent eligibility criteria, academic and financial assistance, inclusive institutional cultures, and accountability mechanisms, significantly enhance educational access, representation, public sector participation, and long-term socio-economic mobility for historically marginalized groups without systematic evidence of academic decline. At the same time, evolving legal and political environments, particularly in the United States and Europe, are encouraging shifts toward race-neutral or socioeconomically based alternatives whose equity outcomes remain uneven and require continuous evaluation. The review further demonstrates that affirmative action is most effective when educational inclusion is linked with employment opportunities, institutional transformation, and broader capability-enhancing frameworks. By integrating educational and employment perspectives within a comparative global framework, this study contributes a cross-sectoral understanding of affirmative action as a multidimensional instrument of equity, inclusion, and social transformation.

Keywords: Affirmative Action, Public Employment, Higher Education, Social Mobility, Labour-Market Inclusion, Governance, PRISMA, Systematic Review.

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INTRODUCTION

Affirmative action has emerged as one of the most influential yet contested policy instruments for addressing historical and structural inequalities in education, employment, governance, and public representation. Originally developed as a corrective mechanism to redress systemic discrimination against marginalized racial, ethnic, caste, gender, and minority groups, affirmative action has evolved into a multidimensional framework connected to broader debates on equity, meritocracy,

inclusion, social justice, and democratic representation (Warikoo and Allen, 2020; Arcidiacono *et al.*, 2015; Gururaj *et al.*, 2021). While early scholarship largely focused on access to higher education, contemporary research increasingly recognises that affirmative action extends beyond admissions policies into public employment systems, labour-market participation, political representation, institutional governance, and long-term social mobility outcomes (Deshpande and Weisskopf, 2016; Prakash, 2020; Neto and Medeiros, 2023). The global expansion of affirmative action policies reflects growing recognition that formal equality alone cannot dismantle deeply entrenched social hierarchies and inherited disadvantages embedded in race, caste, ethnicity, gender, disability, and class structures (Blum, 2016; Shariff, 2023; Maurya, 2025).

The theoretical foundation of affirmative action lies in the distinction between equality and equity. Equality assumes identical treatment for all individuals, whereas equity recognises



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differentiated historical starting points and justifies compensatory interventions to achieve substantive fairness (Gururaj *et al.*, 2021; Ikawa, 2024). This distinction has shaped policy debates across jurisdictions, particularly regarding whether affirmative action should prioritize diversity, redistribution, representation, or restorative justice. In many countries, affirmative action has become intertwined with nation-building projects, constitutional reforms, and democratization processes (Jayal, 2015; Warikoo and Allen, 2020). Consequently, affirmative action today represents not merely an educational policy but a broader governance framework intended to restructure access to opportunities, public institutions, and socio-economic mobility pathways.

The United States remains one of the most studied contexts in affirmative action scholarship. Introduced during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, affirmative action sought to address racial exclusion in higher education and employment while promoting diversity and equal opportunity (Allen *et al.*, 2018; Boykin and Palmer, 2016). Judicial decisions such as *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), and *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard and UNC* (2023) significantly shaped the legal trajectory of race-conscious admissions policies (Chilton *et al.*, 2022; Curfman, 2022). Recent studies indicate that post-SFFA institutional responses increasingly rely on race-neutral alternatives such as socioeconomic indicators, geographic targeting, percentage plans, and holistic admissions criteria (Gooch *et al.*, 2024; Starr, 2024; Brotherhood *et al.*, 2023). However, evidence suggests that these alternatives often fail to replicate the diversity outcomes achieved under explicit affirmative action policies, especially in elite institutions (Kehal *et al.*, 2021; Antman *et al.*, 2024). Scholars further argue that contemporary opposition to affirmative action in the United States reflects broader ideological conflicts surrounding meritocracy, colorblindness, and systemic racism (Sterling, 2021; Lee, 2021; Sulé *et al.*, 2022). Research also demonstrates that affirmative action contributes significantly to professional diversity in sectors such as medicine, law, and public administration, influencing institutional legitimacy and service delivery outcomes (Aaron *et al.*, 2023; Charles *et al.*, 2025).

Brazil is among the most extensive affirmative action transformations in Latin America. Since the implementation of federal quota laws in the early 2000s, Brazilian public universities have adopted race- and class-based reservation systems to improve access for Afro-Brazilians, Indigenous peoples, and students from public schools (Schwartzman and Paiva, 2016; Bellini and Constantino, 2016). Empirical evidence consistently shows that quota policies significantly improved representation without producing systematic academic decline (Francis-Tan and Tannuri-Pianto, 2018; Heringer, 2024). Studies reveal that quota students often demonstrate comparable or even convergent academic performance over time when institutional support systems are available (Biazotto *et al.*, 2022; Frio and França, 2022;

Pelegrini *et al.*, 2022). Beyond education, recent scholarship increasingly explores labor-market transitions and social mobility among quota beneficiaries, demonstrating positive effects on employability, occupational mobility, and income generation (Neto and Medeiros, 2023; Oliveira *et al.*, 2024; Soares, 2024). The Brazilian experience has also generated important debates regarding racial verification commissions, institutional governance, and identity validation processes (Batista and de Figueiredo, 2020; Moraes *et al.*, 2024; Dantas and Almeida, 2024). These developments highlight the evolving relationship between affirmative action, bureaucratic governance, and anti-racist institutional reform.

India represents one of the oldest and most constitutionally embedded affirmative action systems in the world. The reservation framework for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) was introduced to address centuries of caste-based exclusion and social stratification (Jayal, 2015; Basant and Sen, 2020). Unlike diversity-oriented Western models, India's affirmative action system is rooted in historical redress, distributive justice, and political representation (Mitra, 2020; Shariff, 2023). Research demonstrates that reservations have significantly improved educational attainment, access to government employment, and intergenerational mobility among disadvantaged groups (Khanna, 2020; Prakash, 2020; Pragati and Thakur, 2024). Studies of public employment quotas indicate measurable gains in representation within government services and public-sector institutions (Kumar *et al.*, 2020; Deshpande and Weisskopf, 2016). However, scholarship also highlights persistent inequalities associated with regional disparities, institutional discrimination, stigma, and unequal access to elite institutions (Dhawan *et al.*, 2023; Deshpande, 2019). Intersectional analyses further reveal how caste, gender, religion, and class interact to shape educational and employment outcomes (Sabharwal, 2024; Surana and Rai, 2025). The Indian case, therefore, demonstrates both the transformative potential and the enduring sociocultural complexities of affirmative action systems.

South Africa's affirmative action framework emerged from the post-apartheid constitutional commitment to equity, transformation, and racial reconciliation. Policies such as the Employment Equity Act and higher education transformation mandates were designed to dismantle apartheid-era inequalities in education, employment, and institutional governance (Louw, 2015; Barbosa *et al.*, 2018). Research shows that affirmative action contributed to increased racial and gender diversity within universities and public-sector employment, although structural inequalities remain deeply entrenched (Matsepe *et al.*, 2020; Kerr *et al.*, 2017). Scholars argue that transformation fatigue, symbolic compliance, and institutional resistance continue to undermine substantive equity goals (Pietersen, 2023; Oelofsen, 2018). Studies on employment equity further demonstrate tensions between representational diversity and meritocratic narratives

in both public and private sectors (Ebrahim, 2018; Foley and Williamson, 2019). Recent work also emphasises intersectionality within South African affirmative action, particularly regarding gender inclusion, leadership representation, and labour-market participation (Klasen and Minasyan, 2021; Akala, 2019).

Beyond these four major contexts, affirmative action has expanded across Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America in diverse forms. Malaysia's Bumiputera policy represents a state-led redistributive model aimed at reducing ethnic economic inequalities through preferential access to education, public employment, and business opportunities (Lee, 2019). In China, ethnic minority preferential policies and regional educational quotas seek to reduce developmental disparities between Han-majority and minority regions while maintaining social cohesion (Yi *et al.*, 2024). Nigeria and Kenya employ affirmative mechanisms through federal character principles and public service balancing systems to promote ethnic representation and national integration (Simson, 2019; Antwi-Boasiako, 2017). Uganda, Ethiopia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Georgia, Sudan, and Afghanistan have also implemented affirmative or quota-based systems addressing gender, ethnicity, regional inequality, or educational disadvantage (Odaga, 2022; Alemu, 2019; Subedi *et al.*, 2022; Silva *et al.*, 2021; Tabatadze and Gorgadze, 2017; Tenret, 2016; Najam, 2024). European countries such as France generally avoid explicit racial quotas but increasingly pursue diversity through indirect socioeconomic and territorial inclusion strategies (Giraut, 2024; Crusmac, 2019). These global experiences reveal substantial variation in the philosophical foundations, implementation mechanisms, and institutional outcomes of affirmative action policies.

A major shift in recent scholarship concerns the growing connection between affirmative action and labor-market outcomes. Earlier studies focused primarily on educational access and representation, whereas contemporary research increasingly examines transitions from higher education to employment, occupational mobility, leadership participation, and long-term income effects (Guimarães *et al.*, 2019; Neto and Medeiros, 2023). Studies from Brazil, India, Nepal, and South Africa indicate that affirmative action policies can positively influence labor-market integration and social mobility when educational inclusion is linked with institutional support, professional networks, and employment opportunities (Subedi *et al.*, 2022; Oliveira *et al.*, 2024; Behera and Kumar, 2025). Similarly, affirmative action in public employment has become central to debates concerning bureaucratic representation, governance legitimacy, and democratic participation (Garner *et al.*, 2020; Hood, 2024; Smith and Hunt, 2024). Research on employment quotas, faculty hiring, political representation, and leadership diversity demonstrates that affirmative action influences not only access to institutions but also the composition of decision-making structures and governance systems (Nater and Sczesny, 2016; Henningsen *et al.*, 2022; Jogani, 2022).

Another important development in the literature is the increasing emphasis on intersectionality and multidimensional inclusion. Contemporary affirmative action debates now extend beyond race and caste to include gender, disability, indigenous identity, transgender inclusion, religion, and socio-economic disadvantage (Brinkman *et al.*, 2022; Almeida *et al.*, 2025; Revillard, 2023). Studies from Brazil, India, Colombia, and South Africa show that multiple identities intersect to produce layered forms of exclusion requiring more nuanced policy responses (Sabharwal, 2024; Solano-Cahuana, 2022; Loureiro *et al.*, 2024). Research further suggests that affirmative action policies are most effective when combined with mentoring systems, academic support, financial aid, anti-discrimination measures, and inclusive institutional cultures (Page and Scott-Clayton, 2016; Gomes *et al.*, 2025).

Methodologically, affirmative action scholarship has become increasingly interdisciplinary and empirically sophisticated. Econometric analyses, quasi-experimental designs, bibliometric reviews, ethnographies, discourse analyses, and mixed-methods approaches collectively contribute to understanding policy outcomes and institutional dynamics (Francis-Tan and Tannuri-Pianto, 2018; Cassan, 2019; Allen *et al.*, 2025). Recent studies also examine public perceptions, ideological polarization, and legitimacy debates surrounding affirmative action policies (Turgeon and Habel, 2022; Petts, 2022; Alt and Goh, 2024). Findings indicate that public support often depends on framing, perceived fairness, historical awareness, and broader political ideology.

Despite decades of implementation, affirmative action remains politically contested and legally vulnerable across many countries. Critics argue that preferential policies undermine meritocracy, intensify identity politics, or generate dependency and stigma (Sultana, 2019; Richardson-Self, 2023). However, a substantial body of empirical evidence contradicts the "mismatch hypothesis" and demonstrates that beneficiaries generally perform comparably to non-beneficiaries while achieving significant long-term mobility gains (Allen *et al.*, 2025; Zeidan *et al.*, 2024). The persistence of inequality in educational attainment, labour-market access, leadership representation, and public employment further suggests that affirmative action continues to play an important role in addressing structural disparities.

Against this backdrop, the present study adopts a global comparative perspective to examine affirmative action across education, public employment, labour-market participation, governance, and social mobility. Unlike prior reviews that focus narrowly on educational admissions, this study integrates cross-sectoral and cross-national perspectives to understand how affirmative action functions as a multidimensional equity framework. Drawing on bibliometric analysis and systematic review methods, the study synthesises scholarship from multiple regions and disciplinary traditions to identify dominant themes, emerging debates, and evolving policy trajectories.

Despite the extensive growth of affirmative action scholarship, several important gaps remain within the existing literature. First, most studies examine educational admissions, employment equity, or governance representation separately, resulting in a fragmented understanding of how affirmative action operates across interconnected institutional domains. Second, comparative global analysis remains limited, as much of the literature continues to focus disproportionately on the United States and a small number of higher education systems. Third, insufficient attention has been paid to the relationship between affirmative action and long-term labour-market mobility, particularly in the public sector and in bureaucratic representation. Fourth, intersectional dimensions involving disability, gender identity, indigeneity, and regional inequality remain underexplored in many national contexts. Finally, few bibliometric and thematic integration studies systematically map the conceptual evolution and global structure of affirmative action research. The present study addresses these gaps by adopting an integrated comparative framework connecting education, employment, governance, representation, and social mobility across diverse global contexts.

Given the evolving legal, political, and institutional landscapes across different national contexts, how can affirmative action policies in education and public employment be designed and implemented to ensure equitable access, representation, labour-market inclusion, and long-term social mobility while balancing concerns of merit, legitimacy, and institutional effectiveness?

This study advances the affirmative action literature in several important ways. First, unlike prior reviews that focus primarily on higher education admissions and diversity outcomes, the present study develops an integrated cross-sectoral framework linking educational access, academic performance, public employment participation, labour-market mobility, governance inclusion, and long-term social transformation. Second, the study combines bibliometric mapping with qualitative thematic synthesis to examine the intellectual evolution, conceptual structure, and global diffusion of affirmative action research between 2015 and 2025. Third, the review expands comparative analysis beyond dominant Western contexts by incorporating evidence from India, Brazil, South Africa, Malaysia, Nigeria, China, France, Kenya, Uganda, and Australia. Finally, the study conceptualises affirmative action not merely as a compensatory justice mechanism but as a broader capability-enhancing framework aimed at restructuring institutional opportunity systems and promoting inclusive governance.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 explains the research methodology and bibliometric procedures. Section 3 presents the bibliometric findings and scientific production analysis. Section 4 develops an integrated conceptual framework linking education, public employment, labour-market mobility, and social inclusion. Section 5 discusses the policy

implications for education, employment, and governance systems. Section 6 presents the conclusions of the study, while Section 7 outlines future research directions.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a systematic review and bibliometric analysis approach to examine the evolving global scholarship on affirmative action in education, public employment, labour-market participation, governance, and social mobility. The methodology integrates quantitative bibliometric techniques with qualitative thematic synthesis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the conceptual evolution, geographical distribution, thematic structure, and policy implications of affirmative action research between 2015 and 2025.

The review process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework adapted for bibliometric studies. The PRISMA approach ensured transparency, replicability, and methodological rigour across the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion stages. The study combined records retrieved from two major academic databases: Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, thereby improving the breadth, reliability, and interdisciplinary coverage of the dataset. The search strategy incorporated combinations of keywords, including *affirmative action*, *reservation policy*, *quota systems*, *educational inclusion*, *employment equity*, *public employment*, *social mobility*, *diversity*, and *representation*.

As illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram, an initial total of 4,255 records were identified through database searches, including 1,523 records from Web of Science and 2,732 records from Scopus. Duplicate removal procedures reduced the dataset to 2,811 records. Subsequently, temporal filtering limited the dataset to publications published between 2015 and 2025, yielding 1,242 records. Document type filtering was then applied to retain only peer-reviewed journal articles, reducing the dataset to 828 studies. Language filtering limited the review to English-language publications to ensure consistency in thematic interpretation and comparative analysis.

Further screening procedures were conducted to improve the analytical relevance of the dataset. Publications lacking final publication status, incomplete indexing information, or insufficient thematic relevance were excluded. Keyword screening and abstract review were then conducted to identify studies directly related to affirmative action in education, employment, governance, social equity, representation, and labour-market outcomes. Following these multi-stage screening procedures, a final corpus of 96 studies was included for bibliometric and thematic analysis.

The PRISMA flow diagram in Figure 1 summarises the complete study selection process, including identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion, for the 96 studies

analysed in this review. The bibliometric component of the study aimed to identify patterns of scientific production, influential themes, collaborative networks, and conceptual structures within the affirmative action literature. Bibliometric indicators included annual scientific production, country scientific production, corresponding author analysis, thematic mapping, keyword co-occurrence analysis, thematic evolution, and collaboration networks. Visualisation techniques were used to examine the intellectual structure and the geographical diffusion of research across countries and disciplines. The bibliometric analysis highlighted dominant research clusters in diversity and inclusion, race and caste equity, public employment and labour-market integration, social justice, governance, and intersectionality.

To complement the quantitative bibliometric analysis, a qualitative thematic synthesis approach was adopted. Thematic synthesis enabled deeper interpretation of the conceptual debates, policy trajectories, and implementation experiences across different national contexts, including the United States, India, Brazil, South Africa, Malaysia, Nigeria, China, and France. Studies were systematically coded along key dimensions, including policy objectives, target groups, educational outcomes, employment effects, institutional governance, social mobility, legal frameworks, and public perceptions. This integrative approach facilitated comparison between diverse affirmative action systems while also identifying recurring themes, emerging challenges, and evolving global trends.

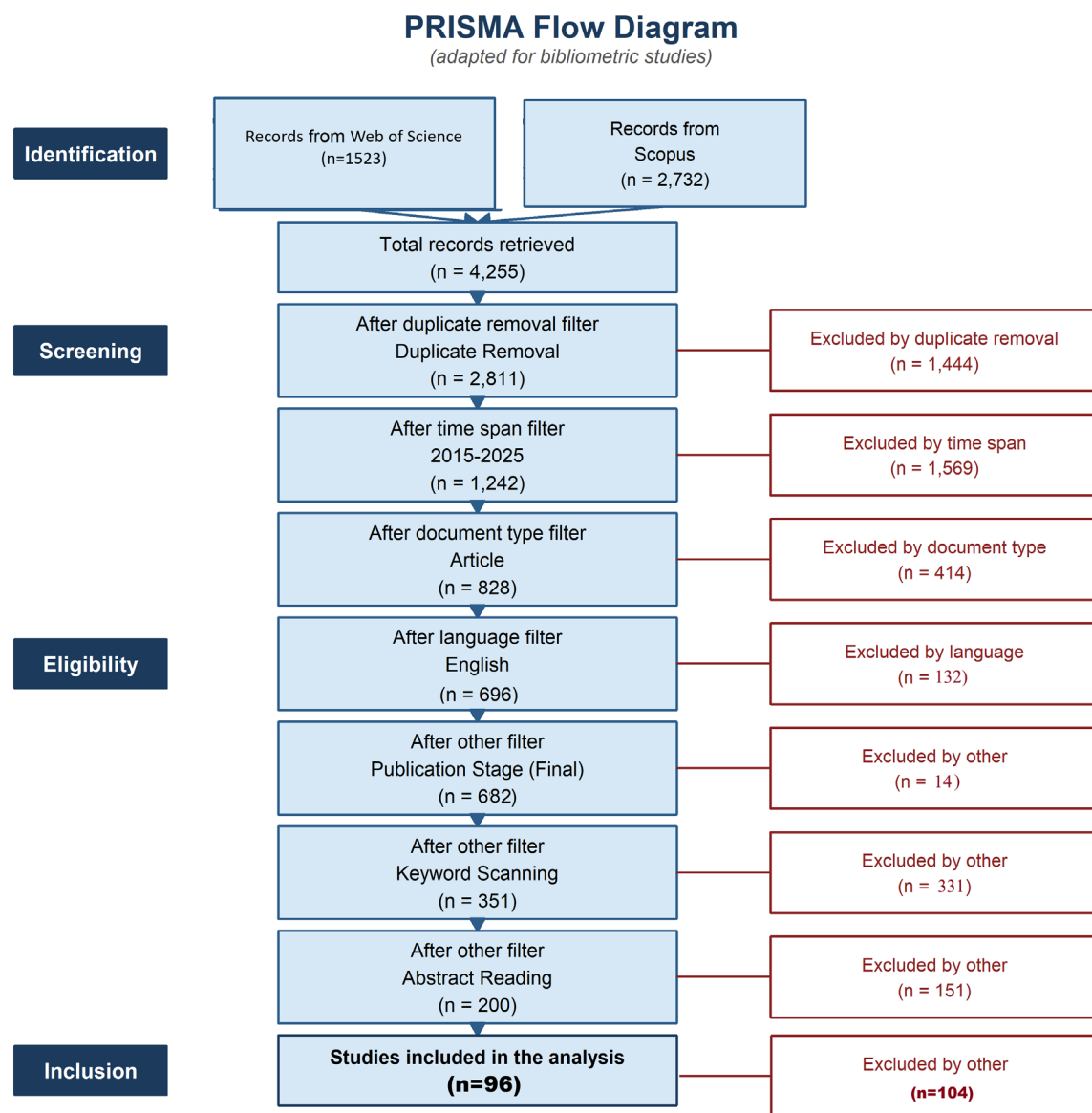


Figure 1: PRISMA Flowchart for Systematic Literature Review.

The inclusion of both bibliometric and thematic synthesis methods enhances the study's methodological robustness by combining macro-level scientific mapping with micro-level interpretive analysis. While bibliometric analysis provides insight into the structure and evolution of scholarly production, thematic synthesis enables contextual understanding of policy implementation, institutional experiences, and socio-political debates. Together, these methods offer a multidimensional perspective on affirmative action as a global policy instrument operating across education, employment, governance, and social inclusion systems.

BIBLIOMETRIC FINDINGS

The bibliometric analysis provides a comprehensive overview of the intellectual structure, thematic evolution, geographic distribution, and collaborative dynamics of affirmative action research published between 2015 and 2025. Using the final dataset of 96 studies retrieved from Scopus and Web of Science, the analysis identifies major research trends, influential thematic clusters, and patterns of global scholarly engagement. The findings reveal that affirmative action scholarship has expanded considerably over the past decade, moving beyond educational admissions to encompass public employment, labour-market integration, governance, diversity management, and social mobility.

Keywords Analysis

The keyword co-occurrence analysis (Figure 2) reveals that the affirmative action literature is strongly centred on *higher*

education, diversity, race, equity, social justice, and representation, indicating the continued dominance of educational inclusion and anti-discrimination discourse within the field. Emerging keyword clusters related to *public employment, labour-market mobility, governance, intersectionality, and institutional inclusion* demonstrate a significant conceptual expansion beyond university admissions toward broader socio-economic and governance dimensions. Strong linkages between keywords such as *reservation, quota systems, employment equity, social mobility, gender, and public policy* further suggest increasing interdisciplinary integration across education, sociology, law, economics, and governance studies. The presence of geographically linked terms, including *India, Brazil, South Africa, and the United States*, highlights the comparative and globally evolving nature of affirmative action scholarship.

Figure 3 depicts a keyword co-occurrence heatmap, generated through bibliometric analysis, that reveals distinct thematic concentrations in the literature on affirmative action in education. The most prominent clusters form around “affirmative action,” “higher education,” and “policy,” underscoring the field’s policy-analytic orientation and its grounding in debates over access, equity, and institutional reform. These central nodes are strongly linked with terms such as diversity, social justice, admissions, and representation, reflecting how research integrates legal, sociological, and educational perspectives. The high co-occurrence frequency among these keywords indicates a cohesive intellectual structure in which policy design, educational outcomes, and equality frameworks interact dynamically. Peripheral keywords like intersectionality, gender equity, and

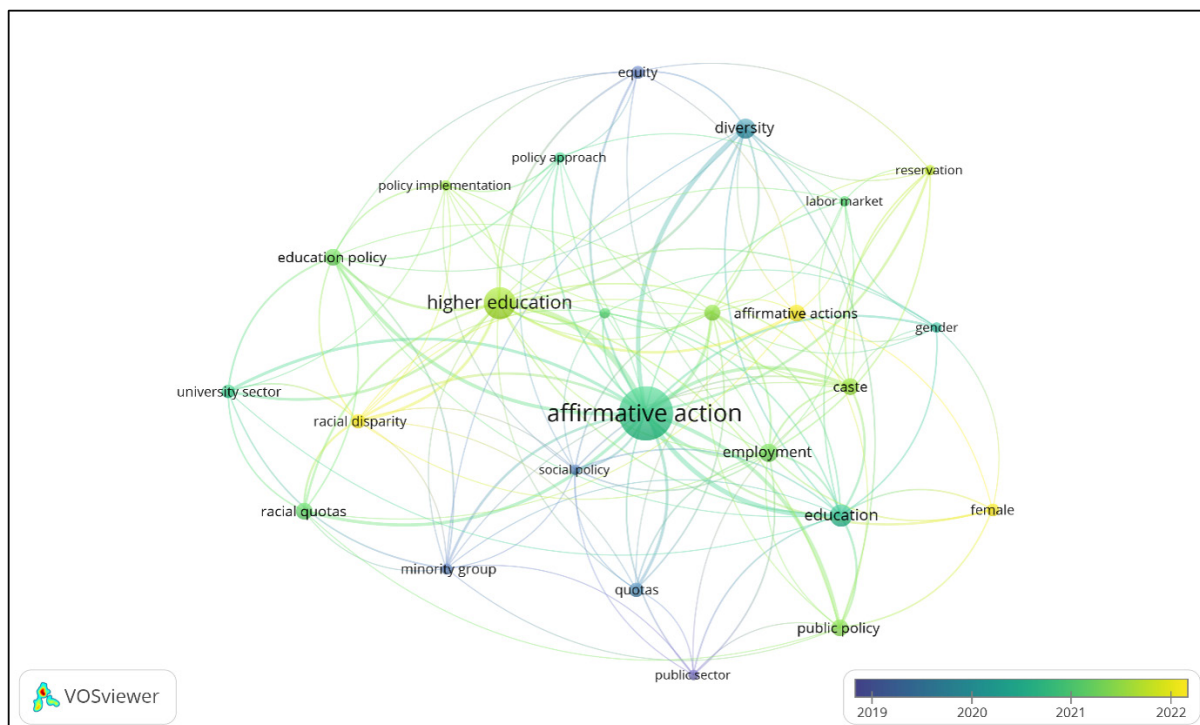


Figure 2: Keywords Network Analysis Using VOSviewer.

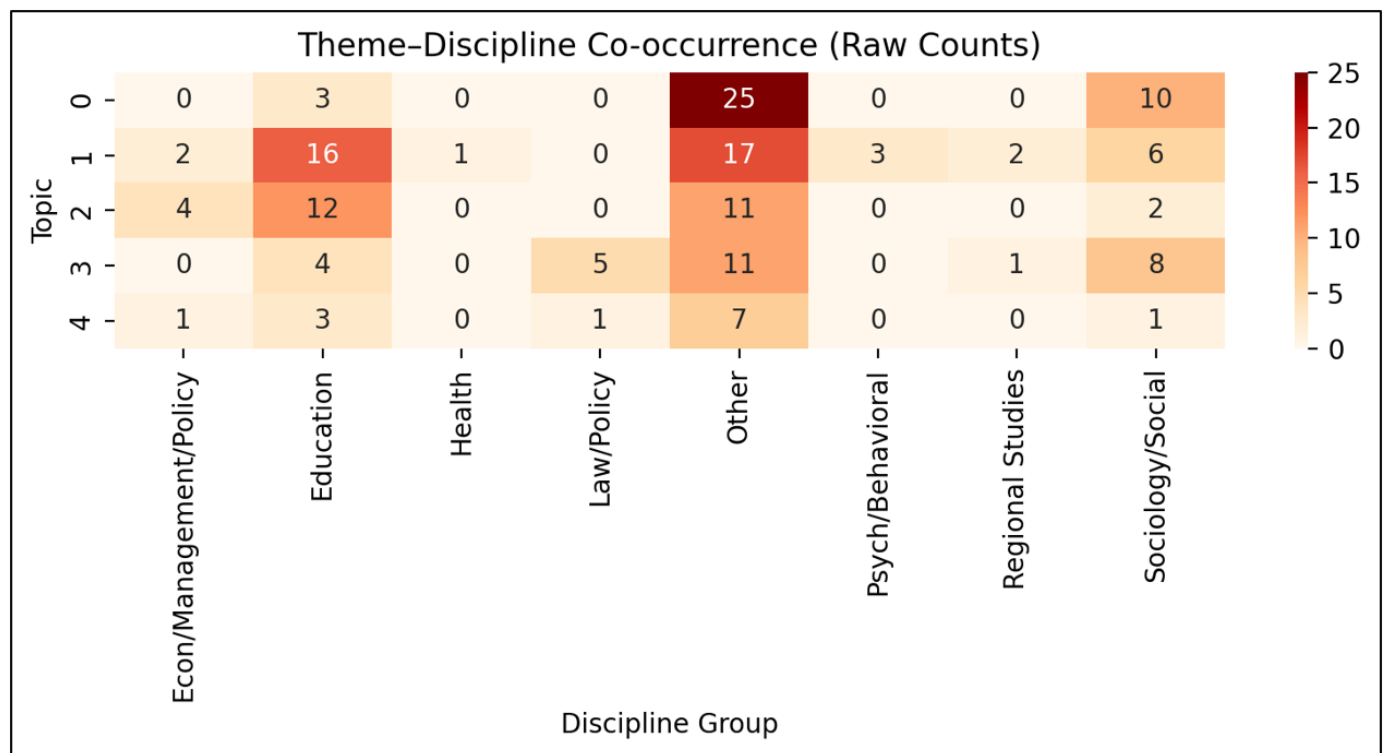


Figure 3: Keyword Co-occurrence Heatmap.

economic mobility suggest expanding analytical horizons that connect affirmative action to broader societal and developmental goals. Minor technical artefacts, such as publishing boilerplate terms like “rights reserved,” were identified and easily removed through preprocessing, ensuring semantic clarity and analytical precision (Maes *et al.*, 2021; Page and Scott-Clayton, 2016). The heatmap visualisation reinforces the idea that affirmative action research remains anchored in the policy-performance nexus, while increasingly branching into multidimensional domains of inclusion and capability-building.

Annual Scientific Production

The analysis of annual scientific production demonstrates a consistent increase in scholarly interest in affirmative action during the study period. The annual publication trend indicates moderate research activity between 2015 and 2018, followed by accelerated growth after 2019. The number of publications increased substantially during the post-2020 period, reaching its highest level in 2024 before stabilising slightly in 2025.

The observed increase reflects the growing global relevance of affirmative action debates in response to widening socio-economic inequalities, racial justice movements, judicial interventions, and changing governance frameworks. In the United States, renewed scholarly attention emerged following legal and political debates surrounding race-conscious admissions policies, particularly after the *Students for Fair Admissions* decision (Gooch *et al.*, 2024; Hardwicke, 2024). Similarly, Brazil experienced an expansion of research activity focused on the consolidation and evaluation of

racial quota systems in higher education and public institutions (Heringer, 2024; Moraes *et al.*, 2024). India’s reservation system continued to attract interdisciplinary scholarship examining caste-based inequalities, educational inclusion, and employment mobility (Khanna, 2020; Shariff, 2023).

As evident in Figure 4, the increasing publication trend also reflects the diversification of affirmative action research into new thematic domains, including labour-market outcomes, governance systems, gender quotas, disability inclusion, and intersectionality. Recent scholarship increasingly investigates long-term socio-economic mobility, employment transitions, and institutional representation rather than focusing solely on educational access (Neto and Medeiros, 2023; Revillard, 2023). The rise in publications after 2020 further corresponds with broader global discussions concerning Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), anti-racism movements, and post-pandemic inequalities. The annual scientific production analysis demonstrates that affirmative action has evolved into a major interdisciplinary research field engaging scholars from education, sociology, economics, public policy, law, political science, and governance studies.

Country Scientific Production

The country’s scientific production analysis reveals a highly uneven but globally expanding distribution of affirmative action scholarship. The United States emerged as the leading contributor to the literature, reflecting its long-standing legal, political, and institutional debates surrounding race-conscious policies in

education and employment. Brazil ranked as the second-largest contributor, followed by India and South Africa, indicating the strong scholarly engagement of countries with constitutionally embedded or institutionally extensive affirmative action systems.

The dominance of the United States reflects the centrality of judicial decisions, higher education diversity policies, and public discourse surrounding race and meritocracy (Allen *et al.*, 2018; Chilton *et al.*, 2022). U.S.-based scholarship also demonstrated strong interdisciplinary integration across law, sociology, medicine, public policy, and economics (Aaron *et al.*, 2023; Curfman, 2022). Brazilian scholarship focused extensively on racial quotas, social mobility, educational access, and institutional verification systems (Francis-Tan and Tannuri-Pianto, 2018; Heringer, 2024). India's contribution primarily addressed reservation systems, caste inequality, labor-market transitions, and constitutional justice (Jayal, 2015; Khanna, 2020).

South African research emphasized transformation, employment equity, governance reform, and post-apartheid inclusion (Matsepe *et al.*, 2020; Pietersen, 2023). Emerging contributions from countries such as Malaysia, Nigeria, China, Kenya, Uganda, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Georgia, and France indicate that affirmative action is increasingly recognized as a global governance and inclusion issue rather than a policy confined to Western educational institutions.

The geographic distribution (Figure 5) further demonstrates that affirmative action research is strongly influenced by national historical contexts, institutional structures, and socio-political inequalities. Countries with deeply embedded histories of racial, caste-based, colonial, or ethnic exclusion produced more sustained and policy-oriented scholarship. At the same time, newer contributions from Europe and Asia increasingly explore indirect affirmative mechanisms, gender quotas, multicultural integration, and socioeconomic targeting. The findings suggest that affirmative action scholarship is transitioning from nationally isolated debates toward a more comparative and globally interconnected field of inquiry.

Corresponding Author Analysis

The corresponding author analysis highlights patterns of international scholarly collaboration and institutional research networks within affirmative action studies. The United States accounted for the largest number of corresponding authors, followed by Brazil and India. These countries also demonstrated the highest levels of international co-authorship and collaborative publication activity.

Single-Country Publications (SCP) dominated the dataset, indicating that much of the affirmative action literature remains context-specific and nationally grounded. This pattern reflects the fact that affirmative action policies are often deeply embedded

Number of Publications vs. Year

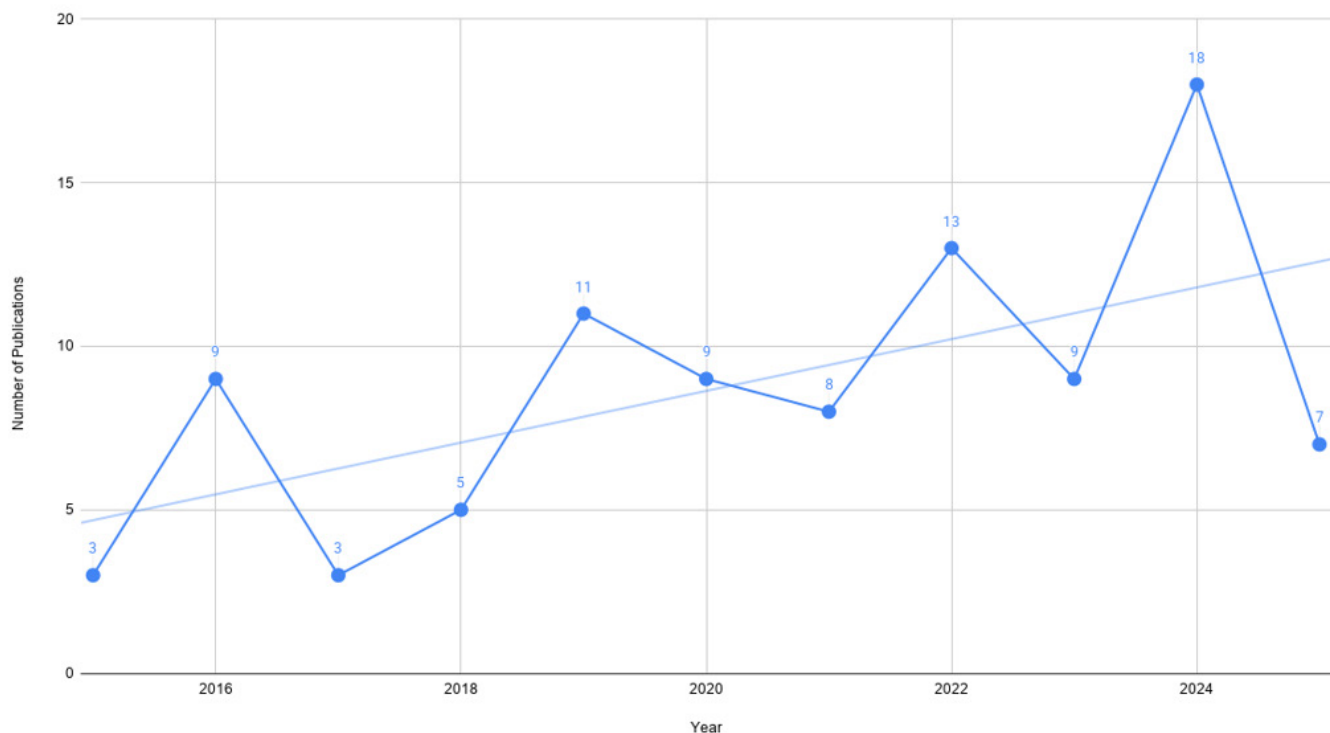


Figure 4: Growth Of Affirmative Action Research (2015-2025).

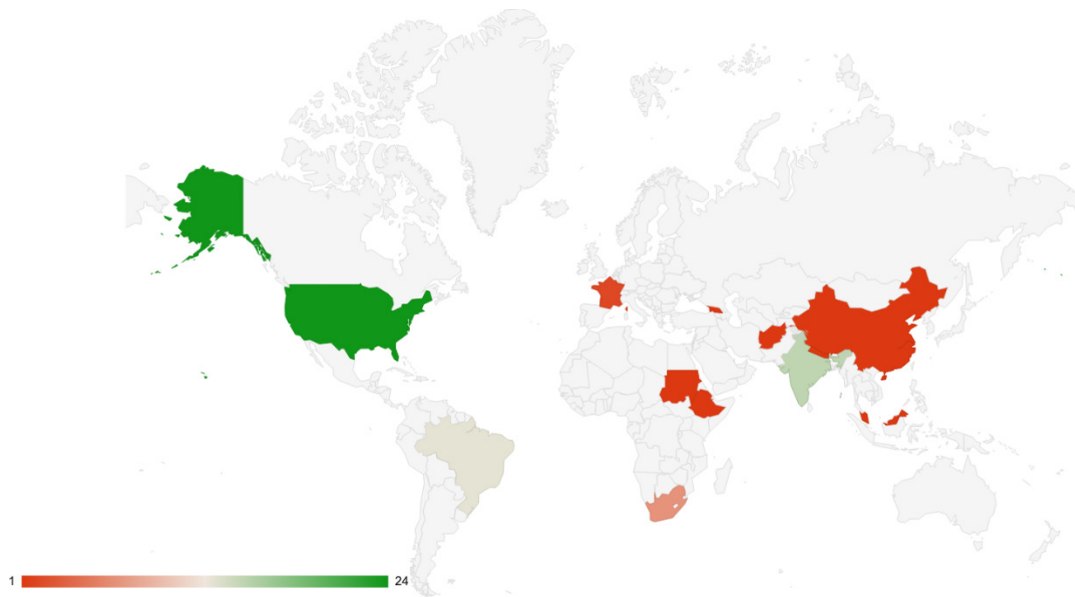


Figure 5: Global research distribution.

within unique constitutional, legal, racial, caste, or historical frameworks. For example, studies from India frequently focus on reservation systems and caste dynamics, while Brazilian scholarship centers on racial quotas and university access (Basant and Sen, 2020; Zeidan *et al.*, 2024).

Nevertheless, the increasing presence of Multiple-Country Publications (MCP) demonstrates growing international dialogue regarding diversity, inclusion, and social justice policies. Collaborative research networks were particularly visible between scholars from the United States, Brazil, South Africa, and European countries. These collaborations often addressed comparative policy analysis, governance structures, and intersectional dimensions of affirmative action.

The collaboration analysis also reveals the emergence of Global South scholarship as an increasingly important contributor to the field. Scholars from Africa, Latin America, and Asia are playing a larger role in shaping debates on educational access, labor-market integration, and public representation. This shift contributes to the de-Westernization of affirmative action discourse and broadens understanding of how different societies operationalize equity and inclusion. The corresponding author analysis indicates that affirmative action research is becoming progressively internationalized while retaining strong national policy orientations.

Thematic Map Analysis

The thematic map analysis identifies the conceptual structure and developmental trajectories of major research themes within the affirmative action literature. The map categorizes themes into four quadrants based on centrality (relevance) and density

(development): motor themes, niche themes, emerging or declining themes, and basic themes are shown in Figure 6.

The cluster containing *higher education*, *Brazil*, and *student* appeared within the basic themes quadrant, indicating that educational access and racial quotas remain foundational topics within the literature. These themes are highly central but have relatively low density, suggesting that they constitute the intellectual core of affirmative action scholarship while continuing to evolve conceptually and empirically. The *education-India-employment* cluster occupied a transitional position between basic and emerging themes, reflecting the growing scholarly emphasis on the relationship between educational inclusion and labor-market outcomes. This cluster demonstrates the increasing importance of employment reservations, social mobility, and governance systems within contemporary affirmative action research (Prakash, 2020; Kumar *et al.*, 2020). Themes associated with *affirmative action*, *race*, and *diversity* appeared as niche themes characterized by high density but lower centrality. These themes represent mature and specialized debates primarily concentrated within U.S.-centered diversity discourse and legal scholarship (Burns and Darity, 2019; Lee, 2021).

Meanwhile, concepts related to *public policy*, *human rights*, and *governance* emerged as developing themes with growing relevance across global contexts. The increasing centrality of governance-oriented themes suggests that affirmative action is increasingly being conceptualized not merely as an educational intervention but as a broader institutional and social policy mechanism. The thematic map therefore demonstrates a clear evolution from narrowly defined educational access debates toward multidimensional discussions involving employment equity, governance reform, social mobility, and institutional representation.

Co-occurrence Network Analysis

The keyword co-occurrence network analysis reveals the intellectual relationships and conceptual clusters that structure affirmative action scholarship. The network identifies several interconnected thematic communities representing the multidimensional nature of the field shown in Figure 7. The largest and most central cluster revolved around *affirmative action*, *higher education*, *diversity*, *race*, and *equity*, confirming that educational access and racial inclusion remain dominant organizing concepts within the literature. This cluster showed strong interconnections with themes related to social justice, representation, discrimination, and institutional transformation.

A second major cluster focused on *employment*, *governance*, *public policy*, and *social mobility*, indicating the growing integration of labor-market and institutional governance perspectives within affirmative action research. Studies within this cluster frequently addressed public employment quotas, workforce diversity, employment equity legislation, and occupational mobility outcomes (Ebrahim, 2018; Smith and Hunt, 2024). Another important thematic grouping centered on *gender*, *intersectionality*, *women's representation*, and *leadership diversity*. This reflects the expanding recognition that affirmative action

policies increasingly address multiple and overlapping forms of exclusion including gender, disability, ethnicity, and transgender inclusion (Brinkman *et al.*, 2022; Almeida *et al.*, 2025).

The network also revealed strong connections between concepts such as *caste*, *reservation*, *India*, *race quotas*, and *Brazil*, demonstrating the comparative significance of these two national models within global scholarship. Emerging peripheral clusters related to *healthcare*, *policing*, *faculty hiring*, and *bureaucratic representation* further indicate the widening application of affirmative action principles beyond traditional university admissions systems. The co-occurrence network analysis demonstrates that affirmative action has evolved into a highly interconnected and interdisciplinary research domain linking education, employment, governance, law, social justice, and institutional transformation.

Lotka's Law and Author Productivity

The application of Lotka's Law reveals a highly unequal distribution of author productivity within affirmative action scholarship. The findings indicate that the majority of authors contributed only a single publication to the field, while a much smaller number of scholars produced multiple high-impact studies. This pattern

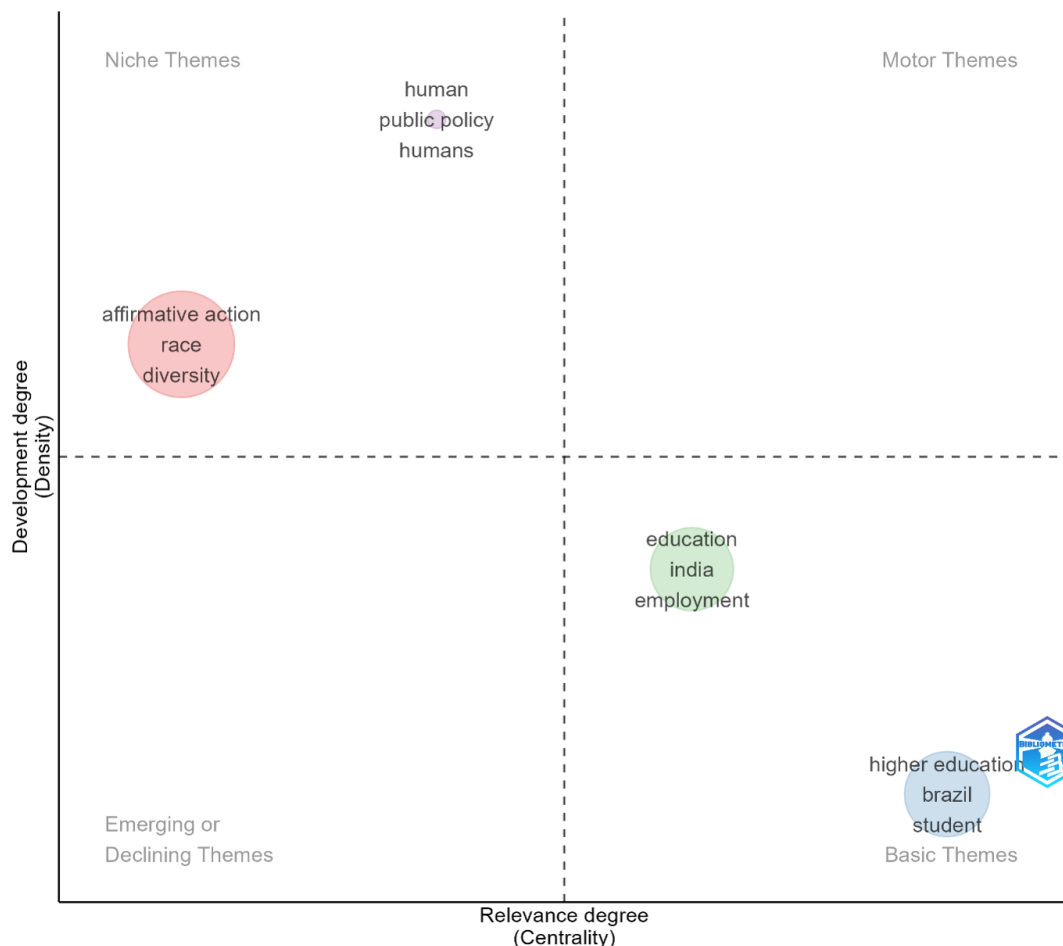


Figure 6: Motor, Niche, and Emerging Themes.

Employment Equity Act, Nigeria's Federal Character Principle, and Malaysia's Bumiputera policies illustrate different approaches to institutional redistribution and representational justice (Jayal, 2015; Simson, 2019; Matsepe *et al.*, 2020; Lee, 2019; Heringer, 2024).

The second stage concerns educational access, where affirmative action policies seek to improve participation rates among historically excluded communities. Research consistently demonstrates that reservation systems, quotas, and holistic admissions policies significantly increase access for marginalized racial, caste, ethnic, indigenous, and low-income populations (Khanna, 2020; Francis-Tan and Tannuri-Pianto, 2018; Allen *et al.*, 2018). In Brazil, quota policies substantially increased Afro-Brazilian and public-school student participation in universities, while India's reservation framework improved access for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes (Basant and Sen, 2020; Heringer, 2024). Similarly, South African transformation policies expanded representation within post-apartheid higher education institutions (Pietersen, 2023).

Educational access alone, however, does not guarantee meaningful inclusion. The third stage therefore focuses on academic retention and performance. Existing evidence largely contradicts the "mismatch hypothesis," which claims that affirmative action beneficiaries perform poorly within competitive institutions. Studies from Brazil and the United States demonstrate that beneficiaries generally achieve comparable academic outcomes

when adequate mentoring, bridging programs, financial support, and institutional inclusion mechanisms are available (Francis-Tan and Tannuri-Pianto, 2018; Zeidan *et al.*, 2024). Nevertheless, disparities remain particularly within STEM disciplines, elite institutions, and resource-constrained systems, indicating the need for sustained institutional support and inclusive campus environments (Brinkman *et al.*, 2022; Gomes *et al.*, 2025).

The fourth stage links affirmative action with public employment access and labor-market participation. This dimension represents one of the most significant expansions within recent affirmative action scholarship. Earlier studies focused primarily on educational admissions, whereas contemporary research increasingly examines how educational inclusion translates into workforce participation, public-sector representation, leadership access, and occupational mobility (Neto and Medeiros, 2023; Hood, 2024). Public employment remains a particularly important mechanism of affirmative action in developing countries where state institutions are major providers of stable employment and socio-economic advancement.

India's reservation system includes constitutionally mandated quotas within public-sector employment, significantly increasing representation of historically marginalized caste groups within government services (Deshpande and Weisskopf, 2016). South Africa's Employment Equity Act aims to correct racial disparities in public and private employment through representational targets and institutional transformation mandates (Matsepe *et*

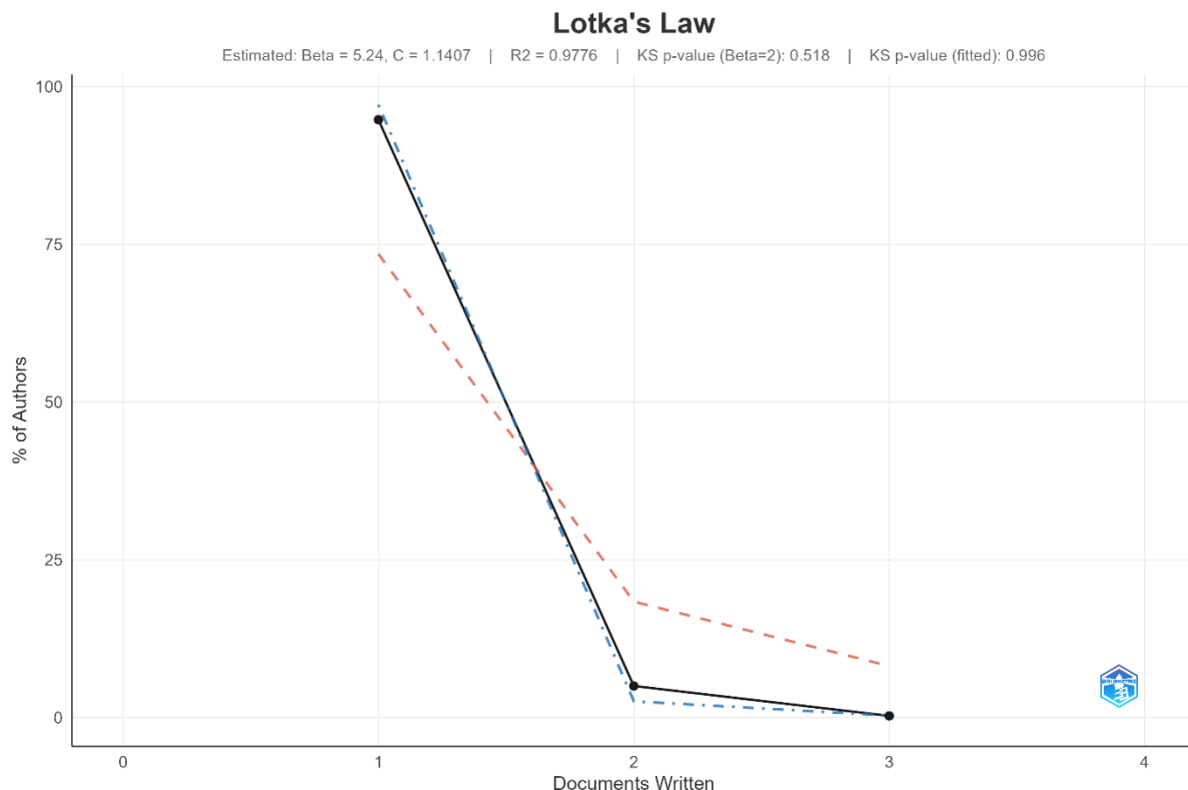


Figure 8: Author Productivity Distribution.

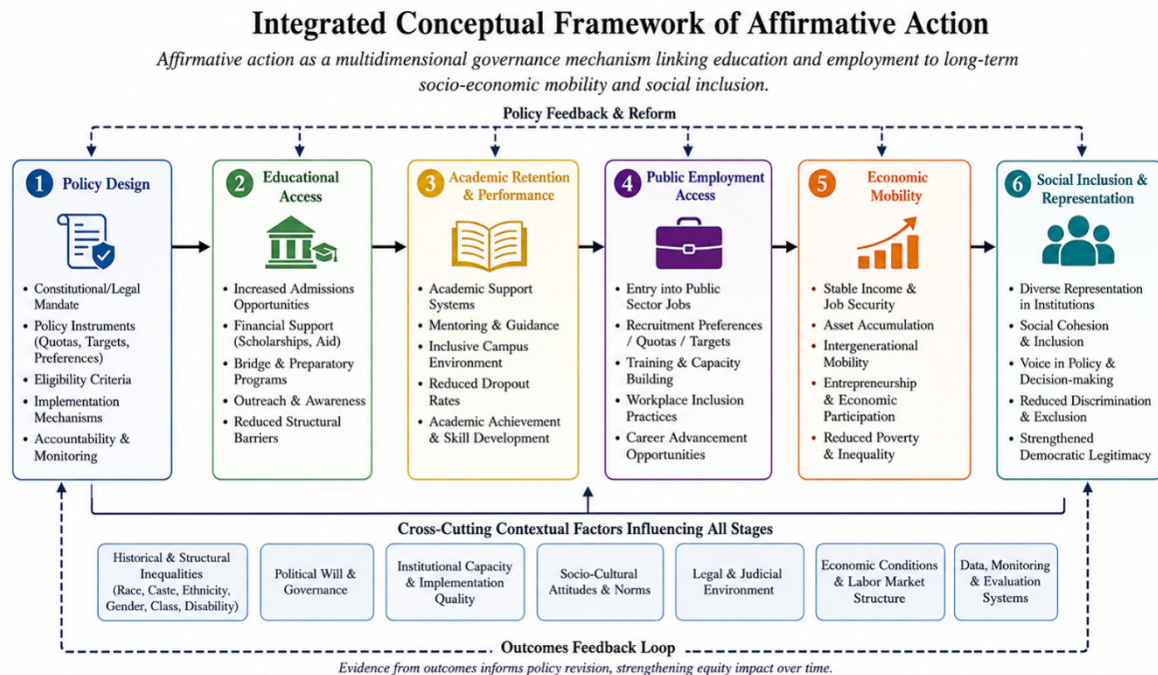


Figure 9: Integrated Conceptual Framework of Affirmative Action Linking Education, Public Employment, Economic Mobility, and Social Inclusion.

al., 2020). Nigeria's Federal Character Principle seeks to balance ethnic representation in public institutions and bureaucratic structures to promote national integration and governance legitimacy (Simson, 2019). Brazil has similarly expanded quota systems into public service recruitment and federal employment systems, broadening affirmative action beyond university admissions (Moraes *et al.*, 2024). These examples demonstrate that affirmative action increasingly operates as a governance and labor-market inclusion strategy rather than merely an educational policy.

The fifth stage of the framework concerns economic mobility. Educational inclusion and public employment participation collectively influence long-term income generation, occupational mobility, and intergenerational advancement. Studies from Brazil, India, and South Africa indicate that affirmative action contributes positively to employability, wage growth, and socio-economic integration when beneficiaries receive institutional support and stable employment opportunities (Oliveira *et al.*, 2024; Subedi *et al.*, 2022). Research also demonstrates that affirmative action can disrupt inherited cycles of exclusion by enabling marginalized communities to access professional occupations, bureaucratic institutions, and leadership positions (Neto and Medeiros, 2023; Shariff, 2023).

The final stage, social inclusion and representation, emphasizes the broader societal implications of affirmative action. Increased representation within educational institutions, public employment systems, and governance structures contributes to institutional legitimacy, democratic participation, and social

cohesion (Allen *et al.*, 2018; Ebrahim, 2018). Representation also influences symbolic recognition and challenges historically entrenched hierarchies related to race, caste, ethnicity, gender, and disability. Studies further show that diverse institutions often improve organizational responsiveness, governance quality, and public trust (Garner *et al.*, 2020; Smith and Hunt, 2024). Consequently, affirmative action should be understood not solely as a redistributive mechanism but also as a transformative framework aimed at restructuring institutional cultures and opportunity systems.

The integrated framework proposed in this study therefore advances affirmative action scholarship in three important ways. First, it bridges the traditional divide between education-focused and employment-focused literature by conceptualizing affirmative action as a continuous social mobility pathway. Second, it incorporates governance, labor-market participation, and institutional representation into the analytical framework, thereby expanding the conceptual scope beyond admissions-based debates. Third, it situates affirmative action within comparative global contexts, demonstrating how different societies operationalize equity, inclusion, and representational justice according to distinct historical and constitutional conditions.

The framework also highlights the growing importance of intersectionality within affirmative action systems. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes that race, caste, ethnicity, gender, disability, indigeneity, and socio-economic disadvantage interact in complex ways to shape exclusion and opportunity

Table 1: Thematic Synthesis Table.

Theme	Key Findings	Geographic Focus	Major Policy Instruments	Key References	Research Gap
Educational Access	Reservations and quotas improve participation of marginalized groups in higher education and professional institutions.	India, Brazil, USA, South Africa	Quotas, reservations, holistic admissions, racial preference systems.	Khanna (2020); Heringer (2024); Basant and Sen (2020).	Limited longitudinal tracking of beneficiaries.
Academic Retention and Performance	Minimal evidence of academic mismatch when institutional support systems exist.	Brazil, USA	Mentorship programs, bridging support, financial aid, inclusive pedagogy.	Francis-Tan and Tannuri-Pianto (2018); Zeidan <i>et al.</i> (2024).	Need more STEM-focused and institutional-comparison studies.
Public Employment	Affirmative action improves representation within government and public-sector employment systems.	India, Nigeria, South Africa, Brazil	Reservation systems, employment equity legislation, public-sector quotas.	Simson (2019); Matsepe <i>et al.</i> (2020); Deshpande and Weisskopf (2016).	Weak linkage between education and employment outcomes.
Labor-Market Mobility	Educational inclusion contributes to employability, occupational advancement, and income mobility.	Brazil, USA, India	Graduate inclusion policies, employment reservations, diversity hiring.	Neto and Medeiros (2023); Oliveira <i>et al.</i> (2024).	Limited cross-country comparative analysis.
Diversity and Inclusion	Diverse institutions strengthen representation, legitimacy, and social cohesion.	USA, Australia, South Africa	Diversity admissions, indigenous inclusion programs.	Allen <i>et al.</i> (2018); Akala (2019).	Limited evidence from Asian and African institutions.
Legal and Policy Governance	Judicial decisions increasingly reshape affirmative action models and institutional practices.	USA, France	Race-neutral policies, constitutional reforms, socioeconomic targeting.	Gooch <i>et al.</i> (2024); Giraut (2024).	Need post-SFFA and post-policy-shift evaluations.
Intersectionality	Gender, caste, disability, and ethnicity interact to shape exclusion and opportunity structures.	India, South Africa, Brazil	Inclusive quotas, multidimensional inclusion frameworks.	Sabharwal (2024); Brinkman <i>et al.</i> (2022); Revillard (2023).	Limited disability-focused empirical research.
Public Perception and Legitimacy	Meritocracy narratives strongly influence public support and policy acceptance.	USA, India	Public communication strategies, institutional outreach.	Alt and Goh (2024); Turgeon and Habel (2022).	Need media discourse and public opinion studies.

Theme	Key Findings	Geographic Focus	Major Policy Instruments	Key References	Research Gap
Governance and Representation	Bureaucratic diversity strengthens institutional legitimacy and democratic participation.	Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa	Federal character principles, public service balancing.	Simson (2019); Garner <i>et al.</i> (2020).	Insufficient governance-performance evaluation.
Race-Neutral Alternatives	Socioeconomic proxies produce uneven diversity outcomes compared to explicit affirmative action.	USA, France	Geographic targeting, socioeconomic admissions.	Brotherhood <i>et al.</i> (2023); Gooch <i>et al.</i> (2024).	Limited evidence regarding long-term equity outcomes.

structures (Sabharwal, 2024; Revillard, 2023). Countries such as South Africa, India, Brazil, Australia, and Kenya increasingly incorporate multidimensional inclusion strategies addressing overlapping forms of marginalization (Akala, 2019; Almeida *et al.*, 2025). This shift indicates that affirmative action is evolving toward broader capability-enhancing and inclusion-oriented governance systems.

Furthermore, recent legal and political developments reveal important tensions within affirmative action systems globally. Judicial constraints in the United States and France increasingly encourage race-neutral or indirect affirmative mechanisms based on socioeconomic disadvantage, geographic targeting, or institutional diversity indicators (Gooch *et al.*, 2024; Giraut, 2024). At the same time, countries such as Malaysia, China, Nigeria, and South Africa continue to emphasize group-based representational policies linked to ethnicity, race, or regional identity (Lee, 2019; Yi *et al.*, 2024). These variations demonstrate that affirmative action remains deeply shaped by national political cultures, constitutional traditions, and historical inequalities.

The integrated conceptual framework developed in this study positions affirmative action as a multidimensional mechanism that connects education, employment, governance, social mobility, and institutional transformation, as shown in Table 1. Rather than treating educational inclusion and labour-market participation as isolated policy domains, the framework demonstrates their interdependence within broader systems of equity and social justice.

Effects of Affirmative Action

As illustrated in Figure 10, the impacts of affirmative action extend across multiple social, educational, economic, and institutional domains, demonstrating its role as a multidimensional mechanism of social transformation rather than merely an admissions policy. The most prominent effects are observed in strengthening diversity and inclusion within higher education institutions and

professional sectors, where affirmative action has significantly improved representation of historically marginalized racial, caste, ethnic, gender, and socio-economically disadvantaged groups. By expanding educational opportunities, these policies have contributed to more inclusive academic environments, enhanced intercultural engagement, and broader institutional participation. Closely connected to these outcomes is the promotion of social equity and the reduction of structural inequalities, as affirmative action directly addresses long-standing barriers linked to discrimination, exclusion, and unequal access to resources.

The broader societal implications of affirmative action are also reflected in areas such as crime reduction, civic participation, healthcare inclusion, and public-sector representation. Increased access to education has been associated with lower levels of social exclusion, higher civic engagement, and improved pathways into professional occupations, including medicine, public administration, and governance systems. In particular, affirmative action policies have enhanced participation in STEM education and professional training among women and underrepresented minorities, thereby contributing to workforce diversification and innovation capacity. Simultaneously, evolving legal and policy frameworks continue to shape the implementation of affirmative action through constitutional interpretation, policy compliance mechanisms, and institutional accountability systems, ensuring that these policies remain adaptable within changing political and judicial environments.

At the economic level, affirmative action contributes to improved educational attainment, labor-market integration, and intergenerational mobility, particularly for first-generation learners and historically disadvantaged communities. Evidence from multiple national contexts suggests that affirmative action strengthens employability, income opportunities, and access to stable public-sector employment, thereby linking educational inclusion with broader socio-economic advancement. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that affirmative action functions as an integrated equity framework connecting education, employment,

governance, social justice, and long-term capability enhancement across generations.

Affirmative Action and Public Employment

Affirmative action in public employment represents one of the most significant yet comparatively underexplored dimensions of equity policy frameworks. While educational access remains central to affirmative action discourse, public-sector employment constitutes a critical mechanism through which historically marginalized communities achieve long-term economic security, institutional representation, and political inclusion. In many developing and post-colonial societies, government employment functions not only as a source of stable income but also as an avenue for social mobility, bureaucratic participation, and democratic legitimacy (Simson, 2019; Garner *et al.*, 2020).

In India, affirmative action extends beyond higher education into constitutionally mandated reservations within public-sector employment. Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) benefit from quotas across government institutions, administrative services, and public enterprises (Deshpande and Weisskopf, 2016). Empirical studies demonstrate that reservation policies have improved representation among historically excluded caste groups within public administration while contributing to intergenerational

mobility and educational aspiration (Khanna, 2020; Prakash, 2020). Nevertheless, persistent inequalities remain within elite bureaucratic positions, indicating that formal inclusion does not always translate into equal institutional power (Sabharwal, 2024).

South Africa's Employment Equity Act similarly seeks to redress racial exclusion inherited from apartheid by promoting representational diversity within both public and private sectors. Employment equity policies have expanded participation among Black South Africans and women within managerial, administrative, and professional occupations (Matsepe *et al.*, 2020). However, scholars also identify challenges related to symbolic compliance, institutional resistance, and unequal advancement opportunities despite numerical inclusion (Pietersen, 2023; Ebrahim, 2018).

Nigeria's Federal Character Principle provides another important model of affirmative representation within public institutions. The policy aims to balance ethnic and regional representation in government employment and administrative structures to strengthen national integration and reduce perceptions of ethnic exclusion (Simson, 2019). Similar mechanisms are observed in Kenya and Uganda, where public-service balancing policies seek to ensure ethnic and regional inclusiveness within state institutions (Akala, 2019).

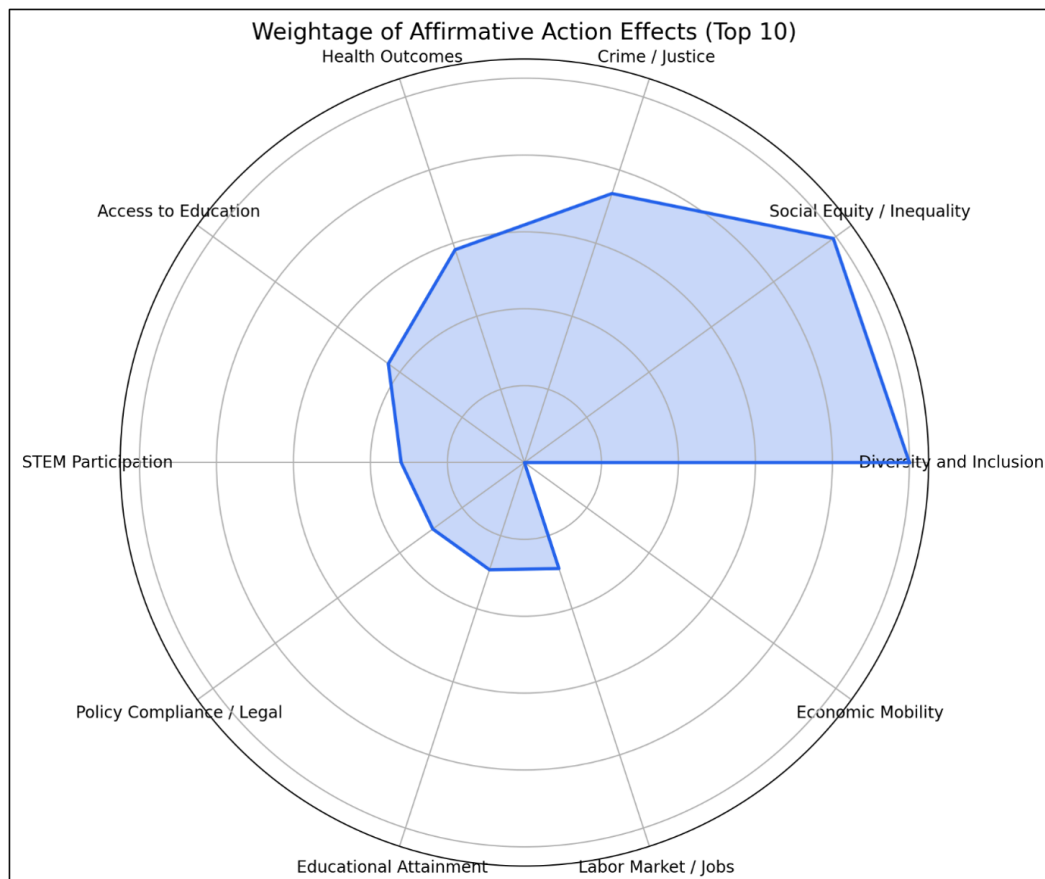


Figure 10: Spider Diagram to show the Effects of Affirmative Action.

Brazil has increasingly expanded affirmative action into public-sector recruitment systems. Federal quota laws now apply not only to higher education institutions but also to civil service recruitment, thereby strengthening racial representation within state bureaucracies and public organizations (Moraes *et al.*, 2024). Research suggests that these policies contribute to broader institutional transformation by increasing visibility and participation of Afro-Brazilian communities within governance structures (Heringer, 2024). The growing incorporation of affirmative action into employment systems demonstrates a major conceptual shift from compensatory educational access toward broader institutional transformation and governance inclusion. Public employment therefore functions as a bridge connecting educational opportunity with economic mobility, bureaucratic representation, and democratic participation.

Comparative Global Models of Affirmative Action

Affirmative action policies vary significantly across national contexts due to differences in constitutional structures, historical inequalities, demographic compositions, and political ideologies. Comparative analysis reveals that affirmative action systems can broadly be categorized into redistributive, representational, diversity-oriented, and socioeconomic targeting models. The United States primarily employs diversity-oriented affirmative action, where institutional diversity and equal opportunity serve as central justifications for race-conscious policies (Allen *et al.*, 2018). However, recent judicial developments increasingly encourage race-neutral alternatives emphasizing socioeconomic disadvantage and geographic diversity (Gooch *et al.*, 2024).

India and South Africa represent redistributive and constitutional justice models rooted in historical correction and social transformation. These systems prioritize group representation and institutional inclusion through legally mandated reservation frameworks (Jayal, 2015; Matsepe *et al.*, 2020). Brazil combines racial and socioeconomic criteria within a hybrid quota model, reflecting the intersection of racial inequality and class disadvantage (Francis-Tan and Tannuri-Pianto, 2018). Meanwhile, Malaysia's Bumiputera policy represents a state-led ethnic redistribution framework intended to reduce economic disparities between majority and minority populations (Lee, 2019).

China adopts regionally differentiated affirmative measures to support ethnic minority populations and less developed regions through educational preferences and targeted institutional support (Yi *et al.*, 2024). France, by contrast, avoids explicit racial quotas and instead employs indirect affirmative mechanisms focused on territorial inequality and socioeconomic inclusion (Giraut, 2024). These comparative experiences demonstrate that affirmative action is not a singular policy model but a flexible governance instrument shaped by historical injustice, political ideology, and institutional capacity.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this review suggest that affirmative action policies are most effective when implemented as part of broader capability-enhancing and institutional transformation frameworks rather than isolated admissions interventions. Educational inclusion alone is insufficient unless accompanied by academic support systems, employment opportunities, institutional accountability, and anti-discrimination mechanisms. First, policymakers should strengthen the linkage between educational inclusion and labor-market transition by integrating mentorship programs, internship pathways, public-sector recruitment initiatives, and professional development support. Research indicates that affirmative action generates more durable outcomes when beneficiaries are supported throughout educational and employment trajectories (Neto and Medeiros, 2023).

Second, governments and institutions should adopt transparent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess both representational outcomes and substantive inclusion. Numerical diversity alone does not guarantee institutional transformation; therefore, affirmative action policies should also assess retention, career advancement, workplace climate, and participation in governance (Smith and Hunt, 2024). Third, intersectional approaches should be incorporated into policy design. Existing evidence demonstrates that race, caste, gender, disability, indigeneity, and socioeconomic disadvantage interact to shape opportunity structures (Revillard, 2023; Sabharwal, 2024). More inclusive frameworks are therefore necessary to address multidimensional exclusion.

Fourth, public communication strategies remain critical for strengthening legitimacy and reducing misconceptions surrounding meritocracy and fairness. Public support for affirmative action is strongly influenced by historical awareness, political framing, and institutional transparency (Alt and Goh, 2024). Finally, policymakers should recognize affirmative action as a governance and social cohesion mechanism rather than solely a redistributive intervention. Inclusive institutions often demonstrate stronger legitimacy, broader representation, and improved responsiveness to marginalized communities (Garner *et al.*, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that affirmative action has evolved from a narrowly defined compensatory policy into a multidimensional mechanism of institutional transformation operating across education, employment, governance, and social inclusion systems. Evidence from diverse global contexts indicates that affirmative action contributes most effectively to long-term equity when educational access is connected with academic support, labor-market inclusion, public

employment participation, and institutional representation. The review further reveals that affirmative action is increasingly transitioning from traditional redistributive justice models toward broader capability-enhancing frameworks focused on expanding opportunities, strengthening democratic legitimacy, and promoting inclusive governance. Although legal, political, and ideological challenges continue to reshape affirmative action globally, the evidence suggests that carefully designed and transparently implemented policies remain essential for addressing persistent structural inequalities and advancing equitable participation within contemporary societies.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This section outlines future research directions by identifying important gaps and emerging areas within affirmative action scholarship. Future studies should move beyond higher education admissions and examine the long-term relationship between affirmative action, public employment, labour-market mobility, and intergenerational social transformation. Greater comparative research is needed across underexplored regions such as Africa, Asia, and Europe to understand how different political, constitutional, and institutional contexts shape policy outcomes. The study also highlights the need for more longitudinal and interdisciplinary research examining the experiences of affirmative action beneficiaries in education, employment, leadership, and governance systems over time. Future scholarship should further investigate intersectional dimensions involving gender, disability, indigeneity, religion, and socio-economic disadvantage, which remain insufficiently explored in many national contexts. Additional attention is also required on emerging debates surrounding race-neutral policies, diversity governance, institutional accountability, and public perceptions of merit and inclusion. Methodologically, future research may benefit from integrating bibliometric analysis with qualitative field-based approaches, policy evaluation studies, and comparative institutional analysis to generate a more nuanced understanding of affirmative action as a multidimensional framework for equity, representation, and inclusive social development.

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ABBREVIATIONS

PRISMA: Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses; **WoS:** Web of Science; **DEI:** Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; **SCs:** Scheduled Castes; **STs:** Scheduled Tribes; **OBCs:** Other Backward Classes; **SCP:** Single-Country Publications; **MCP:** Multiple-Country Publications; **STEM:** Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics; **USA/U.S.:**

United States of America; **DV:** Dileep Verma; **PY:** Pushpender Yadav; **SNS:** Shashikant Nishant Sharma.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

DV conceptualised the study, conducted the systematic review, bibliometric analysis, analytical interpretation, research design, interpretation, and manuscript drafting. Dr PY supervised the critical revision of the manuscript. SNS contributed to manuscript refinement. All authors approved the final manuscript and visualisation support.

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