

BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF WOMEN IN INDIA'S HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Dr. Manju Panwar

*Head, Dept of Social Work,
B P S Mahila Vishwavidhalaya,
Khanpur Kalan, Sonapat, Haryana
E-mail: panwarmanju@gmail.com*

Abstract

Gender disparity in education is apparent across the socio-economic range in India. Higher education is accepted as a powerful tool for the socio-economic development of society. It is heartening to know that the number of women in India in higher education is increasing slowly. Higher education is an important component of the development of any country. However, women in India face major challenges in accessing higher education. Despite progress in gender equal opportunity, there remain disparities, influenced by a variety of socio-cultural and economic factors. There are many girls, particularly in the rural areas who drop out in the middle of higher education and become young mothers before they realize their full potential. The paper analyses the importance of higher education among women and their challenges. A complete understanding of the importance of education for women and the provision of constitution and directive principles particularly for women in higher education have been covered in this paper. There is a need to expand gender-specific policies and programs to bring flexibility to the education system where women can fulfill their goals. Higher education should provide a platform for women to face a world of opportunities and challenges.

Keywords

Development, Higher education, marginalized population

Reference to this paper
should be made as follows:

Received: 11.08.2021

Approved: 30.08.2021

Dr. Manju Panwar

*BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF
WOMEN IN INDIA'S HIGHER
EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS*

Article No.55

RJPSS Apr.-Sept. 2021,

Vol. XLVI No. 2,

pp. 456-465

Online available at:

[https://anubooks.com/rjpss-2021-
vol-xlvi-no-2/](https://anubooks.com/rjpss-2021-vol-xlvi-no-2/)

[https://doi.org/10.31995/
rjpss.2021.v46i02.055](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2021.v46i02.055)

Introduction

Women's participation in higher education has been growing and it is heartening to know more women are earning degrees ranging from undergraduate to professional degrees now. Not only that there has been a remarkable growth among women in pursuing higher degrees and entering academic and professional roles. Women now represent a majority of students in higher education globally. According to UNESCO's Institute for Statistics, in many countries, women outnumber men in tertiary education. For instance in India according to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22, women constitute around 49% of the total students in higher education institutions.

The participation of women in higher education in India has seen a substantial increase over the years. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2019-20, the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) for females in higher education reached 27.3%, compared to 26.9% for males, marking a significant achievement in gender parity in higher education enrollment (AISHE, 2020). This progress can be attributed to various government initiatives, including the establishment of women's universities, scholarship programs, and policies promoting gender equity in education. According to the Ministry of Education, Government of India, the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) for women in higher education in India was approximately 28.7% in 2022. This indicates that nearly 29 out of every 100 eligible women are enrolled in higher education.

Despite making progress, women still face challenges particularly those who belong to marginalized sections of society. If we look at the international level, women's access to higher education differs widely. In many countries, constant efforts are being made to address challenges such as cultural barriers, economic constraints, and institutional biases to increase educational opportunities for women and girls. A lot of work has been done to encourage women's participation in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) fields and to support them to achieve leadership roles in academia and other fields. Women are predominantly enrolled in arts and humanities, education, and social sciences, while their representation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields remains relatively low (Chakraborty, 2019). This trend underscores the need for targeted interventions to encourage female participation in non-traditional fields of study.

Many policies and programs are aimed at supporting women in higher education which has evolved significantly over time. Such initiatives are taken to

Dr. Manju Panwar

understand the barriers to women in higher education and promote them for equal opportunities in academic and professional fields. Programs such as the National Girls Collaborative Project (NGCP) aimed to address gender disparities in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields by providing support to girls and women to increase their participation in these fields. In addition to this, various university-based mentorship schemes also provide guidance and career support to young girls. Policies like flexible work hours and on-campus childcare support are also designed for women to maximize their potential both at the workplace and family level. Many international organizations provide funding, research, and support to increase women's access to higher education in developing countries. No doubt, such efforts are instrumental in addressing barriers such as poverty, cultural norms, social structure, etc. and provide a platform to women for improving educational opportunities for women both at international and national levels.

Importance of Education for Women

Education is an important tool for empowering women which not only enhances their capacity and capability but communities and societies also empower at a large level. Education helps women to upgrade their knowledge, skills, and confidence which enable them to make their own choices and decisions in every sphere of life. It provides them the independence through which women get access to better education resulting in good job opportunities and increasing their economic stability. Research studies show that educated women are more aware of health services and make healthier choices. This results in better health outcomes for themselves and their families. Educated women also play an important role in contributing to economic development with their active participation both in the workforce and in starting businesses. Women's economic participation helps in boosting overall production and economic growth. They also improve their socioeconomic status and support their families by getting good jobs. Educated women are expected to become leaders and advocates for gender equality and social justice. They confront the discriminatory practices and policies that become obstacles in their development and bring positive change in society. They are also role models for future generations who aspire young girls pursue their academic and professional goals. No doubt educated mothers prioritize and support their children's education, resulting in a positive outcome for future generations. Educated women particularly in rural areas also play an important role in empowering local communities and working towards social solidarity. Decision-making from local to global level is also linked with women's education. Education provides women a platform where

they exercise their critical thinking and bring creativity to pursue their passion. Educated women can empower themselves and contribute not only to societal development but also to creating a just and fair world for everyone.

Policies and Programmes for Women in India

In India, various policies and programs have been implemented to improve women's access to higher education. These programs and policies aim to address past inequities, grant financial support, and promote gender equality. In addition to government policies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international agencies have played a significant role in promoting women's education. Programs such as the United Nations Beti Bachao Beti Padhao campaign have raised awareness about the importance of educating girls and have contributed to changing societal attitudes towards women's education (UNICEF, 2019). This section describes some key policies and programs related to making women accessible to education

(i) National Policy on Education

The National Policy on Education, revised in 2020 highlights the importance of gender equality in education. It aims to diminish disparities and promote inclusive education. This policy provides strategies for improving female enrollment rates, particularly in higher education, and supports measures to make education more accessible to women. Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme started in 2015 aims to improve the sex ratio and promote education for girls through awareness campaigns and financial support. The majority of families and communities have benefited from the financial support given for education for girls and improving their enrollment and retention rates.

(ii) Financial Assistance Programmes

Various fellowships are given to students belonging to marginalized sections of society for pursuing M.Phil and Ph.D. degrees. Apart from this, a central sector scheme of scholarships for college and university students is also given. There is another state-specific scholarship that provides financial support to girls interested in pursuing higher education. It also aims to stop marriage at an early age and encourage education among girls.

(iii) Support and Empowerment Programmes

The Ministry of Women and Child Development provides grants to set up and maintain hostels for women students in higher education institutions. Under the swach Bharat Mission, efforts are being made to provide sanitation and hygiene in educational institutions, including hostels.

(iv) Institutional Initiatives

Many gender sensitization programs are being conducted in universities and colleges in India to create awareness of gender sensitization through programs and workshops. Topics related to gender discrimination and harassment are deliberated in detail to understand the concept of gender. Women's Development Cells are also established to support female students who can address their grievances to promote gender equality. These cells play a vital role in providing counseling, support, and advocacy for women, and help in creating a safer academic environment.

(v) Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

The sexual harassment of Women at the Workplace (prevention, prohibition, and Redressal) Act 2013 is a step towards providing a legal framework for ensuring safe and respectful environments for female students and staff. This act mandates that all educational institutions must set up Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) for addressing sexual harassment complaints.

(vi) International and Collaborative Programs

International organizations like UNESCO and others also promote women's education and conduct various programs for enhancing educational opportunities through exchange and collaboration. In addition to this, the Indian government and various educational institutions host conferences and workshops focusing on women's education, gender equality, and empowerment. Such platforms provide forums to share their best practices, research, and policy developments related to women in higher education.

These policies and programs reveal India's commitment to improving women's access to higher education and addressing gender disparities. India aims to enhance educational opportunities for women and promote gender equality in higher education by providing financial support, establishing supportive environments, and implementing legal frameworks.

Constitution and Directive Principles of Women's in Higher Education

In India, the Constitution and Directive Principles of State Policy provide important frameworks and principles aimed at promoting women's education and addressing gender inequality. Under Article 15 of the Fundamental Rights Indian Constitution prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. Hence, this article provides a basis for ensuring that women are not discriminated against in educational institutions and supports efforts to promote equal access to education for women. It also ensures that every individual, including women, has the right to education as a fundamental aspect of the right to life. Under

directive principles of the state policy, every state has to ensure that all citizens, irrespective of sex, have equal opportunities and equal pay for equal work. Article 41 also provides that the State shall, within its limits of economic capacity, make effective provisions for securing the right to work. The state also provides free and compulsory education to all children until they complete the age of fourteen years. This article was originally aimed at primary education but has been expanded to include higher education in various policy reforms. Under the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, 1992, reservations of seats are made for women in local self-government institutions. This Act provides elected women representatives at the village level to ensure women's participation in decision-making related to social issues including education, health, sanitation, and so on. Under the right of children to free and compulsory education, (2009) it is the right of every child from 6 to 14 years to get free and compulsory education.

It is in the above context, that the Constitution and Directive Principles of State Policy in India provide a strong foundation for promoting gender equality in education. They provide a structure for non-discrimination, equal opportunity, and the promotion of women's and children's rights. This constitutional and policy provision jointly support efforts to enhance women's participation and advancement in education at all levels.

Challenges of women's in Higher Education

A range of challenges are being faced by women in higher education that not only impact their ability to sustain their efforts for empowerment but also become obstacles to their academic growth. These challenges differ widely depending on geographical, economic, cultural, and institutional contexts. Some of the key challenges are mentioned below

(i) Expensive Education

The cost of education including hefty fees, expensive books, textbooks, accommodation, and other expenses become obstacles in getting an education for women particularly those who belong to marginalized sections of society. Because of this, the majority of the girls either do not go for higher education or live in the middle as educating children particularly girl children is not the priority in many families. Financial constraints remain a critical barrier, especially for women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Despite the availability of scholarships and financial aid, the cost of higher education, combined with the opportunity costs of forgoing immediate income, discourages many families from supporting their daughters' higher education (Jain & Agarwal, 2016).

(ii) Societal and Cultural Norms

Societal expectations and stereotypes about gender roles can dishearten women from pursuing higher education, particularly in fields traditionally dominated by men, such as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics). Early marriage coupled with family responsibilities becomes an obstacle to achieving educational opportunities for women. Traditional gender roles and societal expectations often prioritize marriage and domestic responsibilities over education for women. Studies have highlighted that early marriage and safety concerns are significant deterrents for girls pursuing higher education, particularly in rural areas (Batra, 2013). According to research by Srivastava and Sharma (2020), socio-cultural norms play an important role in blocking women's access to higher education. Customary beliefs about gender roles, family responsibilities, and societal expectations limit educational opportunities for women. A study by Patel et al. (2021) highlights that in rural areas, early marriage and family pressure deflect young women from pursuing higher education.

(iii) Family Responsibilities

Women have to bear the dual burden of academic and family responsibilities that can affect their academic performance. Due to the lack of family support, women have to leave the dream of getting a higher education and remain under the shackles of society's expectations of taking care of family particularly children and old parents.

(iv) Insufficient infrastructure

Lack of infrastructure like not enough campus facilities and less number of women's hostels are also obstacles to women's access to higher education. A study by Desai (2014) emphasized the need to create a more inclusive and supportive academic environment to enhance women's educational experiences and outcomes. According to a report by the National University of Educational Planning and Administration, in rural areas, insufficient higher education institutions restrict women's access to higher education opportunities.

(v) Safety and Harassment

Women in higher education institutions may face sexual harassment or violence, which can hinder their hostile development resulting in defeating their academic growth and experiencing mental health issues. The insufficient machinery for handling such complaints may further lead to harassment of women. The shortage

of female mentors and role models in particular fields can limit women to use their full potential in the organizational setup.

(vi) Geographical Barriers

Women particularly those who are in rural and remote areas face challenges related to reaching higher education institutions. Due to the lack of transportation, and long distance, women sometimes have to drop the idea of getting higher education. The problem is more acute with women with disability who have to face extra burdens to get access to institutions and accommodation, impacting their capability to join fully in higher education.

(vii) Gap between planning and Implementation of policies

Many countries have policies to promote gender equality in education but the lack of resources, insufficient staff, and no monitoring and evaluations of the schemes and programs being implemented for empowerment of women limit women getting access to higher education. In case policies related to providing scholarships, counseling, and career guidance for women may be insufficient to cater to the needs of women. For example, the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme and the National Scheme of Incentives to Girls for Secondary Education have revealed some positive impacts in empowering young girls but it has many challenges in their implementation, and often lack of awareness among people become an obstacle in achieving its objectives. (Ministry of Women and Child Development).

(viii) Well-being of physical and mental health

Women's physical and mental health may be hampered as women remain under constant pressure of balancing academic and family pressures. Social expectations can contribute to stress and mental health issues in women affecting their overall performance both at the workplace and with family.

Suggestions for Improvement in Women's Education

Above mentioned challenges require a multi-faceted approach and collaboration of various stakeholders like government, nongovernment organizations, local institutions, and community-based organizations which not only help in changing institutions but also work towards changing the mindset of the people. There is a need to create a supportive environment where gender equality must be promoted and women should have access to resources and opportunities to succeed in higher education. Here are some suggestions and strategies to enhance women's participation and success in higher education:

Dr. Manju Panwar

- (i) There is a need to increase scholarships and grants, particularly for women belonging to marginalized sections of society. The provision of low-interest loans can be done to afford higher education.
- (ii) Infrastructure and institutional support must be given to women in terms of providing and ensuring safe and affordable hostels for female students, mainly in remote areas.
- (iii) Requirement of strict enforcement of gender equity policies and anti-discrimination laws in educational institutions. Effective mechanisms for addressing sexual harassment and violence on campus must be maintained.
- (iv) Regular awareness and training programs on sexual harassment and gender sensitivity should be conducted regularly for students and staff.
- (v) The importance of women in higher education must be promoted and gender stereotypes should also be challenged. Successful women in various fields should inspire young girls.
- (vi) Need to work with the families and communities at the grassroots level to make them sensitized about the importance of higher education for women and deal with cultural barriers.
- (vii) Community support groups and networks are to be provided to encourage women to pursue women in higher education.
- (viii) Women's involvement in research through grants, fellowships, and research programs must be promoted.
- (ix) Need to Increase the number of higher education institutions in rural and far-flung areas to reduce geographical barriers.
- (x) The availability of online and distance education programs can be strengthened to reach women who cannot attend conventional institutions.
- (xi) Need to ensure that all educational institutions must be accessible to women with disabilities. Specialized support services are to be given to women with disabilities to increase their academic participation in higher education institutions.
- (xii) Regular monitoring and evaluation are to be done regularly to understand the progress made in women's participation, retention, and success in higher education institutions. A feedback mechanism must be developed to understand women's perspectives on their challenges and suggestions to improve policies and programs.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that women have the same capability as men. Due to the male-dominated society, women very rarely get a chance to express their voice and do not get the opportunity for higher studies. To improve the number of women in

higher education, concentrated efforts are required from governments, nongovernment organizations, educational institutions, families, and local institutions. It is possible to enhance women's participation in higher education by addressing financial, infrastructural, and policy-related barriers and by providing a supportive and inclusive environment.

References

- All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE). (2020). *AISHE 2019-20 Report*. Ministry of Education, Government of India.
- Batra, S. (2013). Gender inequality in education and employment: Challenges for India. *Indian Journal of Social Research*, 54(2), 207-223.
- Chakraborty, S. (2019). Gender disparities in higher education: An analysis of enrollment patterns and outcomes in India. *Journal of Educational Planning and Administration*, 33(4), 233-250.
- Lee, M. M., & Wright, A. P. L. (2023). Gender Inequality in Higher Education: A Review of the Literature. *Review of Educational Research*.
- Patel, A., Shah, D., & Kumar, S. (2021). Socio-Cultural Norms and Women's Education in Rural India. *Education and Development Review*, 19(4), 78-93.
- Srivastava, A., & Sharma, M. (2020). Cultural Norms and Women's Educational Access in India. *Asian Journal of Education and Development*, 22(3), 34-48.
- Ministry of Women and Child Development. (2023). Annual Report on Gender-Based Policy Interventions
- National Education Policy (NEP). (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Ministry of Education, Government of India.
- National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA). (2022). Infrastructure and Access to Higher Education.
- UNICEF. (2019). *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao: An initiative towards gender equality*. United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund.