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Original Article

Participation of Women in Higher Education in India

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Abstract

The participation of women in higher education in India has increased significantly over the past few decades, a significant step towards gender equality and human development. The expansion of colleges and universities, supportive government policies and changing societal attitudes have enabled more women to enter higher education. According to the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), women account for almost half of the total enrolment in higher education and their enrolment rates at the undergraduate, postgraduate and Doctoral levels have improved. However, women's participation is not uniform across all sectors. Women's participation is concentrated mainly in the arts and social sciences, while their representation in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) fields such as engineering and technology is relatively low. Factors such as social norms, safety concerns, early marriage, financial constraints and family responsibilities still affect women's educational and professional advancement. As a result, women remain underrepresented in research, teaching and academic leadership roles. This paper analyses the factors, challenges, and government policies influencing women's participation in higher education in India, based on secondary data and previous research studies. While reform initiatives implemented under the National Education Policy 2020 have improved women's access and retention in education, achieving real gender equality requires reducing structural barriers and promoting women's long-term educational and professional advancement.

Keywords: *Women, Higher Education, Gender Equality, Enrolment (Admission), India, Educational Inequality, Educational Development.*

Introduction

Higher education plays a crucial role in women's empowerment. It enhances women's knowledge, skills, employment opportunities and decision-making power within the family and society. Women's education not only promotes personal development, but also contributes significantly to economic development, gender equality and social mobility. In India, the growth of universities and colleges, policy reforms, scholarship schemes and increasing awareness about girls' education have led to a significant increase in women's participation in higher education. The expansion of institutions in both the public and private sectors has increased women's enrolment, and financial assistance has enabled students from disadvantaged backgrounds to continue their education. According to the recent data from the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), women account for about 48% of the total enrolment in higher education. The enrolment of women in 2021–22 reached about 2.07 crore, reflecting a steady increase in female enrolment over the past decade. This growth reflects the combined effect of government policies, institutional expansion and changing societal attitudes towards women's education. Also, this trend is not limited to urban areas only but also indicates that women's enrolment is increasing in semi-urban and rural areas.

However, high enrolment does not necessarily mean equal participation across sectors. Women's participation is predominantly concentrated in arts, education and social sciences, while their representation in STEM fields such as science, engineering and technology is relatively low. In addition, women's representation at higher educational levels is still limited in Doctoral research, faculty positions and academic leadership roles.

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Available data suggests that social and structural factors have a significant impact on women's subject choices, career progression and academic advancement.

Therefore, while India has made significant progress in expanding women's enrolment in higher education, disparities in participation persist across disciplines, regions and academic levels. This situation highlights the need for a deeper study of the factors shaping women's educational progress, their challenges and institutional conditions. It is therefore imperative to focus on women's retention, progression and long-term educational outcomes rather than being satisfied with high enrolment alone.

Literature Review:

Tilak (2002) found that career gaps, family responsibilities, limited mobility, and institutional barriers affect women's educational advancement. Channana (2004) showed that while women are more represented in some fields, they are underrepresented in engineering, economics, and other STEM disciplines. Factors such as gender norms, occupational mobility, and workplace conditions influence this gap. Kalyan Kumar Kameshwar and Tanu Shukla (2017) explained that women's participation in higher education depends not only on access but also on occupational advancement and institutional incentives, while Ranjan Kumar Das (2017) highlighted regional disparities in women's education, which are influenced by economic development and institutional availability. Research by Isha Chatterjee, Sonal Desai, and Reeve Vanneman (2018) found that social norms and labour market barriers prevent women from always having access to employment opportunities despite higher education. Ambarish Dongre, Karan Singhal and Upasak Das (2020) found that although women's enrolment at higher levels is increasing, their presence in faculty and academic leadership roles is low due to career disruptions and institutional biases. Aparajita Chattopadhyay's (2020) study highlighted the gender gap in STEM education and careers for women. Sanghita Ghosh and Amit Kundu (2021) showed that gender parity has improved at the undergraduate level, but gaps persist in vocational and technical education. Samsur Rahman and Yogita Sharma (2021) highlighted the role of regional and socio-economic disparities in women's education. Research by Varghese and Sabharwal (2022) found that although more women are entering higher education, they face difficulties in converting their education into employment and leadership opportunities; postgraduate and Doctoral Although participation is increasing at the undergraduate level, participation at the faculty, research and leadership levels remains low, which is referred to as the "leaky pipeline".

Research on women's participation in higher education shows that female enrolment has increased at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels and the gender gap in admissions has narrowed. Social and economic background also plays a significant role in women's education. Studies have shown that late marriage, maternal education and increased participation of women in the labour market contribute to higher education attainment. This suggests that women's education is closely linked to broader social conditions. Other studies also highlight the link between education and employment outcomes.

Overall, the literature suggests that women's participation in higher education in India, particularly at the undergraduate level, has increased significantly. However, disparities persist across regions, socio-economic groups and academic disciplines. A common finding is the under-representation of women at advanced educational stages and in research areas. The research literature therefore emphasizes the need for institutional incentives, financial support, guidance and gender-sensitive policies to ensure equal and long-term participation of women in higher education.

Objectives of the Study:

The main objectives of this research paper are as follows.

1. To study the trends in women's participation in higher education in India.
2. To understand the factors influencing women's entry into higher education and their progression.
3. To identify the challenges affecting women's participation in higher education.
4. To review government policies and initiatives that promote women in higher education.
5. To suggest policy measures that can improve women's equal participation in higher education.

Methodology:

The study uses a descriptive and analytical research design. The descriptive approach provides a detailed description of trends and statistics related to women's enrolment, choice of faculties and academic progress, while the analytical approach explains the reasons behind this situation based on social, economic and institutional factors.

The study mainly uses secondary data sources. The necessary information has been collected from research articles, government reports, policy documents, books and institutional records related to gender and education, including the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE).

Trends in Women's Participation in Higher Education:

There is a clear trend of increasing female participation in higher education over the past few decades. However, some inequalities in female participation still persist. Therefore, while the increasing participation of women represents a positive change, effective policy efforts are still needed to achieve balanced and inclusive progress.

1. **Enrolment Trends:**

Women's participation in higher education has been steadily increasing in recent years, driven by high enrolment rates, supportive policies, and growing social acceptance of girls' education.

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Table 1: Enrolment Trends

Indicator	AISHE Data (2021–22)
Female share in total enrolment	49% (2.07 crore women out of 4.33 crore total)
Female enrolment growth (2014–15 to 2021–22)	32% increase
Male enrolment growth	19% increase
Contribution to enrolment growth	Women contributed over 50% of increase
Gender Parity Index (Higher education)	1.01

Sources: *Ministry of Education. (2023). All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021–22 Final Report. Government of India. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2023). Education Data Gender parity index.*

According to the above data, women account for about 49% of the total enrolment in higher education (2.07 crore out of about 4.33 crore students). This shows that India is moving closer to gender parity in higher education. This progress has been achieved due to high enrolment rates, growth in colleges and universities, and promising government policies that reduce barriers to women's education.

Between 2014–15 and 2021–22, female enrolment increased by about 32%, while male enrolment increased by about 19%. As a result, women account for more than half of the total increase in students. Also, UNESCO's Gender Parity Index for India is recorded at 1.01, which means that the ratio of women to men in total enrolment has almost balanced. Overall, these figures indicate a clear progress towards gender parity in enrolment.

2. **Level-wise Participation:**

Women's participation at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels is strong, reflecting higher academic interest and increasing opportunities for research. However, this progress is not fully reflected in academic careers. This situation has been referred to as the "leaky pipeline".

Table 2: Level-wise Participation

Level	Female Share
Undergraduate	48.5%
Postgraduate	56%
PhD / Doctoral	44%
Faculty (overall)	38%
Senior academic leadership	15–25%

Sources: *Ministry of Education. (2023). All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021–22 Final Report. Government of India. University Grants Commission. (2022). Annual Report. UGC.*

The above figures show that women's participation in higher education as students is impressive. At the undergraduate level, the proportion of women is around 48.5% and at the postgraduate level it is around 56%. This shows that many women continue their education after graduation and often participate in higher education at a higher rate than men. At the Doctoral level, women's participation is around 44%, showing a steady improvement in research education.

However, this progress is not being equally sustained in academic employment. Only around 38% of women hold professorial positions, which indicates a decline in representation after completing higher degrees. The gap is even more pronounced in senior academic leadership roles, where women's representation is only between 15 and 25%. Overall, this situation reflects a "leaky pipeline", in which a strong presence of women as students gradually diminishes as they move up to professorial and leadership positions.

3. **Discipline-wise Participation:**

Women's participation in higher education varies by faculty. Female enrolment is highest in the arts, education, and humanities. However, female participation is still low in engineering, technology, and STEM fields.

Table 3: Discipline-wise Participation

Discipline	Female Share
Arts / Humanities	52–55%
Education	60–63%
Health sciences	55–58%
Commerce / Management	48–52%
Science	48%
Engineering / Technology	29–31%
Mathematics / Statistics	45–47%
STEM overall	42–43%

Sources: *Ministry of Education. (2023). All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021–22 Final Report. Government of India. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2023). Education Data — Gender parity index.*

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The above data shows that the highest female participation rates are in the fields of Arts and Humanities (around 52–55%), Education (around 60–63%) and Health Sciences (around 55–58%). These fields are characterised by a clear majority of women. Wide institutional availability, established career paths and strong social acceptance encourage female enrolment. In Commerce and Management, female participation is close to gender parity at 48–52%. In Science, participation is around 48%, while in Mathematics and Statistics it is around 45–47%. These figures show a gradual improvement and indicate that more women are moving towards professional and scientific subjects.

However, a significant gap remains in Engineering and Technology, with female participation at only 29–31%, making this the most underrepresented field for women. Due to the large share of engineering in STEM enrolments, the overall female participation in STEM fields remains around 42–43%, which is lower than in non-STEM subjects. Comparative indicators reported by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics also show that women are underrepresented in STEM fields globally, as well as in India. Overall, this data highlights the faculty-wise segregation; while progress is being made in scientific and professional fields, women's attention is still largely focused on non-STEM fields.

Overall, trends suggest that women's access to higher education has increased significantly and gender balance in enrolment has almost been achieved. However, disparities still exist in women's participation in subject choice, academic career progression and leadership roles. This suggests that policymakers need to focus not only on increasing access but also on providing women with the necessary support and opportunities to continue their education, advance in their careers and reach leadership positions.

Determinants of Women's Participation in Higher Education:

Women's participation in higher education depends on a number of social, economic and institutional factors. These factors influence not only access to education but also whether women continue their education, the subjects they choose and their future careers.

1. **Socio-economic factors:** Family income is a crucial factor in women's education. Higher income enables families to cover the cost of tuition fees, travel, accommodation and digital devices; while financial constraints can delay entry or lead to early dropout. Parental education, especially maternal education, provides a powerful incentive for girls to pursue further education and plan their careers.
   In addition, the rural-urban divide is also evident. While urban areas have more access to colleges, information and employment opportunities, rural students face challenges such as distance, lack of infrastructure and lack of awareness. Thus, socio-economic factors have a significant impact on women's access to and persistence in higher education.
2. **Institutional factors:** The availability of colleges nearby increases female enrolment, as it reduces travel time and reduces concerns about safety. Hostel facilities are crucial for students from rural and semi-urban areas, enabling them to continue their higher education. Measures such as scholarships and financial assistance help reduce financial barriers, especially for disadvantaged and first-generation students.
   In addition, digital access such as devices, internet and digital skills have become an important factor in engaging in online learning and accessing educational resources. Therefore, the combined effect of infrastructure, financial assistance and digital facilities plays a significant role in increasing women's access to and continuation of higher education.
3. **Socio-cultural factors:** Social norms have a significant impact on women's educational choices and career planning. Early marriage often interrupts higher education and limits educational continuity. Security concerns and travel restrictions also affect families' decisions about their daughters' education, especially when colleges are far from home. Limitations on mobility can also constrain subject choices and career opportunities. Research shows that delaying marriage increases the likelihood of completing higher education and gaining employment opportunities.
   In addition, maternal education increases girls' educational aspirations and strengthens educational support at home. Therefore, integrated and coordinated policies that support financial support, institutional facilities, and social change are needed to increase women's participation.

Challenges in Women's Participation in Higher Education:

Although women's enrolment in higher education has increased, many challenges still persist that affect their participation, academic progress, and careers.

1. **Low participation in STEM and technical fields:** Women are relatively underrepresented in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. Gender bias, a lack of role models and a male-dominated environment make these fields less attractive to women and make it difficult to stay in them. As a result, women's opportunities to enter high-paying and fast-growing career fields remain limited.
2. **Dropout due to marriage and caregiving:** Marriage, family duties, childcare and domestic responsibilities often interrupt women's education. This disruption can lead to delayed completion of education, lower completion rates and negatively impact career progression. As a result, women remain relatively underrepresented at higher educational levels.
3. **Regional disparities:** Women from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds face additional barriers such as distance to colleges, inadequate infrastructure, lack of digital access, and financial constraints. As a result, there are significant disparities in participation and persistence in higher education across regions and social groups.

4. **Low representation in faculty and leadership:** Although many women are pursuing education at the college and university levels, relatively few women reach professor, researcher, or academic leadership roles. Career gaps, limited mentoring, gender bias, and fewer research opportunities exacerbate this gap.
5. **Gap between education and employment:** Many women face a variety of challenges in the transition from education to employment. Labor market discrimination, limited mobility, skill mismatches, and workplace expectations can limit employment opportunities. As a result, even after receiving education, the same career outcomes are not always achieved.

The above challenges demonstrate that increasing female participation is not just about increasing enrolment, but requires a broader effort. Policymakers should focus on women's retention in education, their balanced participation across disciplines, the necessary career incentives, and equal employment opportunities, so that women can fully benefit from higher education.

Government Policies and Initiatives Supporting Women's Participation:

Government policies in India play a key role in increasing women's participation in higher education. These policies focus on improving access opportunities, reducing financial barriers, and supporting women's educational advancement and employment opportunities.

1. **Expansion of higher education institutions:** The growth of universities and colleges has improved access to higher education for women, especially in rural and semi-urban areas. New public institutions, women's colleges, and community colleges reduce travel-related barriers and encourage first-generation students to continue their higher education. This institutional expansion has contributed significantly to the increase in female enrolment.
2. **Scholarships for girls:** Scholarship schemes help women continue their education by alleviating financial constraints. These include merit-based scholarships, financial assistance, and fellowships at postgraduate and doctoral levels. Such support is particularly helpful for students from low-income and disadvantaged groups and helps reduce educational dropout.
3. **Residential facilities and hostels:** Hostels for women, secure accommodation on campus and transport facilities help to overcome the problems related to safety and mobility. These facilities make it easier for students from rural and remote areas to study away from home and to participate in specialized or professional courses.
4. **Skill development programmes:** Skill development initiatives improve employability and help women transition from education to employment. Training programs, vocational education, internships, and entrepreneurship support encourage women to enter various business sectors and become financially independent.
5. **Gender-inclusive reforms under National Education Policy 2020:** The policy focuses on gender-inclusiveness in education. It includes measures such as a gender inclusion fund, flexible learning options, multidisciplinary learning and improved digital access. These reforms aim to create a more supportive, accessible and inclusive higher education system for women.

Government initiatives focus on access, affordability, security, and employability. By reducing structural barriers and promoting gender-inclusive practices, these policies help women stay in education, achieve academic progress, and pursue better career opportunities, with increased enrolment.

Discussion:

India has made significant progress in women's participation in higher education. According to the All-India Survey on Higher Education, women now account for nearly half of all enrolments. This reflects the improved access of women to higher education due to more institutions, supportive government policies and changing societal attitudes. However, equal access does not mean equal outcomes. While many women are entering higher education, the proportion of those who reach advanced study, research, faculty positions and leadership roles is relatively low. This often means that women's progress is slowed at the entry level, and therefore it is necessary to study participation beyond just enrolment numbers.

This situation is illustrated by the concept of the "leaky pipeline". While women's participation is strong at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, their presence is low in STEM and technical fields. Factors such as gender bias, institutional environment, limited mentoring, career gaps and work-family responsibilities affect their academic and professional progress. This gap is particularly acute when transitioning to faculty and leadership roles after doctoral studies.

This problem is also reflected in the employment sector. Despite having the same qualifications, women face difficulties such as lower employment rates, wage gaps, career disruptions and concentration in specific sectors. This makes it clear that higher education alone cannot ensure gender equality without the support of labour market and institutional changes. Overall, women's participation needs to be viewed not only in terms of access but also from the perspective of the entire educational and career journey. Therefore, policies need to focus on mentoring, support systems, promotion of women in STEM and a better work-life balance, so that increased enrolment translates into long-term educational and career success.

Recommendations:

To ensure real academic and career success through increased enrolment, policies must effectively address barriers that affect women's educational progression, subject choice and employment opportunities. Such policies must not only increase access but also enable women to remain in education, receive quality education and pursue suitable career opportunities.

1. **Strengthen STEM participation**: Women should be encouraged to participate in STEM fields through special scholarships, mentoring, exposure programs, and industry partnerships. Bringing forward female role models and providing the necessary support for research can help women steadily progress in technical and research-based careers.
2. **Expand safe residential facilities**: More women's hostels, safe transport facilities and secure academic premises are of utmost importance, especially for female students in rural and semi-urban areas. These facilities reduce the hassles associated with travel and mobility and provide women with the opportunity and confidence to pursue education in institutions far from home.
3. **Promote flexible learning and childcare support**: Flexible options such as part-time study, blended learning, re-entry opportunities, and academic block policies help women balance education with family responsibilities. Providing childcare facilities and support for parents can help reduce dropout and career disruption.
4. **Increase women faculty and leadership representation**: Institutions should recruit more female faculty and actively support them in leadership roles. Mentoring systems, leadership training, fair promotion systems, and implementing gender-sensitive policies can help reduce the problem of the "leaky pipeline."
5. **Address rural and socio-economic disparities**: Targeted funding, scholarships, improved digital access, transportation, and the expansion of educational institutions to underserved areas can make it easier for students from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds to pursue higher education. These measures increase the availability of educational opportunities, reduce barriers to entry, and provide students with the support they need to continue their education.
6. **Improve transition from education to employment**: Career counseling, internships, industry engagement, skill development, and women-focused placement support can help women transition from education to employment. Return-to-work programs and the creation of gender-inclusive workplaces are also important, as these measures reduce career disruptions, increase employment opportunities, and provide women with the support they need to achieve long-term professional advancement.

Overall, these recommendations focus on the entire journey from access to education to career progression, helping to translate women's increased participation in higher education into long-term equality and professional success. Such a comprehensive approach ensures that women not only have access to education, but also receive the support they need to advance their education, develop their skills, and sustain their careers.

Conclusion:

Women's participation in higher education in India has increased significantly over the past decade, with enrolments between men and women now reaching almost equal levels. This progress, according to the All-India Higher Education Survey, has been driven by government policies, expansion of colleges and universities, scholarship schemes, and changing societal attitudes towards women's education. Women are now pursuing higher education at a greater rate at the undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral levels, reflecting a significant reduction in structural barriers to entry.

However, inequalities persist. Women are relatively underrepresented in STEM and technical fields, and there are significant regional and socio-economic disparities. Women's participation in faculty positions, research leadership and decision-making roles is declining, suggesting that equal enrolment does not always lead to equal career outcomes. This situation is often referred to as the "leaky pipeline", in which many women enter higher education; but the proportion who progress to research, academic careers and leadership levels declines.

Factors such as family responsibilities, mobility constraints, institutional bias and lack of guidance affect women's educational and professional advancement. Future policies therefore need to focus not only on access but also on progression and sustainability. Measures such as encouraging women in STEM fields, strengthening institutional support, providing flexible learning options, increasing female faculty and leadership, and facilitating the transition from education to employment are needed. Overall, while India has made significant progress towards gender equality in higher education, true equality requires sustained and long-term efforts, so that women can not only access higher education but also succeed in research, leadership and meaningful careers.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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