

Reviewing the Indian Higher Education System: A Gender Specific Perspective

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Abstract: *The gender dimension of education is extremely important since education is a pre-requisite for all kinds of economic activities and acts as a catalyst in gender sensitization and women empowerment. Higher education, in particular, has been visualized as an effective tool of women empowerment because it opens up new vistas of economic and social opportunities for them. However, gender bias is a major cause of deprivation of women regarding access to education. Economic exclusion of women is another acute problem which tends to have spill-over effects in other aspects of life as well. Quite obviously, this trend is of much concern. In this context, education might be the only guiding force which can inculcate the necessary awareness amongst the victimized and vulnerable women and usher in women empowerment. Unfortunately, gender disparity is quite predominant in India's higher education system which is evident through lower enrolment figures. This paper makes an attempt to assess the Indian higher education system from the perspective of gender. It appears that in spite of higher out-turns and pass percentages, employability of Indian women in the higher education sector is quite limited. Equality of opportunity and enhanced access to quality education for women is necessary to reap the advantages of demographic dividend in the context of a growing economy like India.*

Keywords: Enrolment, Gender, GER, Higher Education, Gender Parity

1. Introduction

Gender Dimension of Higher Education

The gender dimension of education is extremely important since education is a pre-requisite for all kinds of economic activities and acts as a catalyst in gender sensitization and women empowerment. Higher education, in particular, has been visualized as an effective tool of women empowerment because it opens up new vistas of economic and social opportunities for them. It has a very crucial role to play in improving the quality of life of women and equipping them with critical abilities to face challenges. As a matter of fact, it has the latent force in it which can demolish mental, social and economic barriers faced by women and usher in women empowerment in all realms of life.

India is one of the fastest growing economies wherein the story of economic empowerment of women, rather than being a singular narrative, is dependent on class, caste, religious and ethnic identities. However, gender bias is a major cause of deprivation of women regarding access to education. Economic exclusion of women is another acute problem which tends to have spill-over effects in other aspects of life as well. Quite obviously, this trend is of much concern. In this context, education might be the only guiding force which can inculcate the necessary awareness amongst the victimized and vulnerable women and usher in women empowerment.

Unfortunately, gender disparity is quite predominant in India's higher education system when reviewed through indicators like total enrolment, Gross Enrolment Ratio, enrolment at various levels of higher education etc. This obviously acts as a deterrent factor in the spread of higher education among women, who are still relegated to the background and denied equal status with men and thwarts women empowerment.

Disparity in Literacy Rates

India accounts for 30% of the world's total illiterate population out of which 70% are women. Hence, it is pertinent to review the status of literacy among women who constitute 48% of the total population of the country. The table below shows the literacy rates in India as computed by the different census.

Table 1: Male - Female Literacy Gap in India (in %)

Census Year	Literacy Rates			Male - Female Literacy Gap
	Male	Female	Total	
1951	27.16	8.86	18.33	18.30
1961	40.40	15.35	28.30	25.05
1971	45.96	21.97	34.45	23.98
1981	56.38	29.76	43.57	26.62
1991	64.13	39.29	52.21	24.84
2001	75.26	53.67	64.83	21.59
2011	82.14	65.46	74.04	16.68

Source: Census 2011

The literacy rate in India has increased from 64.8% in 2001 to 74.04% in 2011. What has been encouraging for the country is increase in female literacy rate (10.9%) has been much higher than the increase in male literacy rate (5.6%). Female literacy increased from 53.67% (Census 2001) to 65.46% (Census 2011). Besides, out of the total of 217.70 million literates added during the period 2001 to 2011, the number of new women literates (110.07 million) exceeded that of men (107.63 million). The increase in female literacy rate (between 2001 and 2011) has been 11.8 percentage points in rural areas and 6.2 points in urban areas. As far as the figures for male literacy are concerned, the increase has been 6.5 percentage points in rural areas and 2.5 points in urban areas. In spite of these encouraging facts, gender gap in education is still very much a cause of concern. Although the gap between male and female literacy rates has come down from 21.6 in 2001 to 16.3 in 2011, it is still quite pronounced. It is worth mentioning that the gap is more prominent in rural areas where it is 19.3% in 2011.

Therefore, until and unless curtailment in the male female literacy gap is made possible, gender - equitable development shall remain inconceivable in the context of our country.

Women’s Enrolment in Higher Education

Enrolment of women in higher education is an important determinant of their access to education and hence is an indicator of women empowerment. The impact wielded by education on women is immense and unquestionable. It is only through access to sound education that women come in contact with the outside world and their mental blockade can be demolished. It is in this context that enrolment figures assume importance.

Total enrolment in higher education has been estimated to be 38.5 million with 19.6 million boys and 18.9 million females (AISHE 2019 - 20). Thus, females constitute 49% of the total enrolment. Such disparity in overall enrolment is substantiated by the fact that there are only 17 Universities in the country exclusively for women and only 10.75% of all colleges, in the country, is exclusively for girls.

Total figures for male and female enrolment at under - graduate level and split into streams is shown below.

Table 2: Enrolment at Undergraduate Level by Streams

Streams	Male	Female
Arts	4547708	5107878
Science	2295673	2459711
Commerce	2132311	2030817
Engineering & Technology	2638085	1089100
Management	446139	267273
Law	287246	145698
IT & Computer	459381	307865
Medical Sciences	547516	804602

Source: AISHE 2019 - 20

Lesser female participation is clearly evident in case of highly specialized and technical streams like management, law, IT & Computer and engineering. The only exception to this trend is medical science where women outnumber men. Among the general streams women enrolment exceeds that of male in both Arts and Science but falls short in Commerce. Since majority of the women enrol in non - technical and/or general streams (which are less job - oriented), their possibility of securing a well - paid job and becoming financially independent gets severely restricted.

There is divergence between male and female enrolment rates at different levels of higher education as well. The table below depicts this.

Table 3: Enrolment of Students in Various Levels of Higher Education (%)

Level	% of females enrolled	% of males enrolled
Ph. D.	45.0	55.0
M. Phil.	62.2	37.8
Post Graduation	56.9	43.1
Under Graduate	49.2	50.8
PG Diploma	46.5	53.5
Diploma	34.9	65.1
Certificate	53.6	46.4

Source: Author’s Calculations

Women enrolment has exceeded male enrolment only in Post - Graduation and M. Phil. At all other levels of higher education, male enrolment is higher. Preference for conventional streams by women is also evident from the figures on enrolment in major programmes both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This is shown in the table below.

Table 4: Enrolment in Major Programmes (%)

Name of Programme	Male	Female
M. A. – Master of Arts	37.7	62.3
M. B. A. – Master of Business Administration	57.4	42.6
M. Sc. - Master of Science	37.5	62.5
M. C. A. - Master of Computer Application	54.7	45.3
M. Com - Master of Commerce	36.7	63.3
M. Tech - Master of Technology	66.8	33.2
M. E. – Master of Engineering	59.6	40.4
M. S. W. - Master of Social Work	45.8	54.2
M. Pharm. - Master of Pharmacy	45.3	54.7
M. Ed. – Master of Education	35.4	64.6
B. A. - Bachelor of Arts	47.1	52.9
B. Com - Bachelor of Commerce	51.2	48.8
B. E. - Bachelor of Engineering	71.0	29.0
B. Tech. - Bachelor of Technology	71.5	28.5
B. Sc. - Bachelor of Science	47.7	52.3
B. C. A. - Bachelor of Computer Applications	61.4	38.6
B. B. A. - Bachelor of Business Administration	61.3	38.7
B. Ed. - Bachelor of Education	34.0	66.0

Source: AISHE 2019 - 20& Author’s Calculations

Female enrolment is higher in conventional streams like B. A., B. Sc., B. Ed., M. A., M. Sc., M. Ed. and M. S. W. However, in case of specialized and expertise oriented professional courses like M. B. A., M. C. A., M. Tech, M. E., B. E., B. Tech and B. B. A female enrolment is much less as compared to male enrolment. This points at the inadequacy of our higher education system to cater to the priorities of job - oriented programmes for women. It also becomes apparent that women still prefer to opt for general stream conventional courses wherein opportunities are limited. This trend is obviously not conducive for the attainment of their economic empowerment.

Enrolment in Regular and Distance Modes of Education

Enrolments at various levels of higher education (through regular mode) are 3.4 crores while through distance mode is 42.8 lakhs. We now try to draw a comparative picture between male and female enrolment in regular and distance modes of education.

Distance education has become one powerful medium of obtaining degrees for large number of students who are staying in far off and remote areas and for whom accessing universities on regular basis is still a dream. It is often preferred by women since it can be pursued from their homes and does not involve rigorous formalities as in the case of regular education. Distance enrolment constitutes about 11.1% of the total enrolment in higher education, of which 44.5% are female students.

The following table shows breakup of higher education enrolment between regular and distance modes of education and split by gender.

Table 5: Enrolments in Regular and Distance Mode

Category	Regular Mode	Distance Mode	Percentage of Total (Regular Mode)	Percentage of Total (Distance Mode)
Male	17264173	2379574	50.4	55.5
Female	16985264	1907348	49.6	44.5
Total	34249437	4286922	-	-

Source: ASHE 2019 - 20

It can be seen from the table that both in case of regular and distance modes of education, female enrolment falls short of male enrolment. Although regular education, by far, exceeds distance enrolment, both female and male enrolment in distance education is quite substantial. In spite of increased preference for distance education by women (for reasons of convenience) women enrolment falls short of that of men as in the case of regular education. Thus, whatever may be the mode of education, women enrolment still lags behind male enrolment.

Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Higher Education

Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is the ratio of the number of students enrolled in higher education to the total population in that age group. GER is important because it determines accessibility to education.

We depict the GER figures in higher education since 2015 - 16.

Table 6: Gross Enrolment Ratio

Year	Male	Female	Total
2015 - 16	25.4	23.5	24.5
2016 - 17	26.0	24.5	25.2
2017 - 18	26.3	25.4	25.8
2018 - 19	26.3	26.4	26.3
2019 - 20	26.9	27.3	27.1

Source: AISHE 2019 - 20

As is evident from the GER figures, women GER has been below that of male throughout except in 2019 - 20. This indeed is quite encouraging as far as women enrolment in higher education is concerned. We show the GER figures for different social groups in the table below.

Table 7: Gross Enrolment Ratio in Higher Education (18 - 23 years)

Category	Male	Female	Total
All	26.9	27.3	27.1
SC	22.8	24.1	23.4
ST	18.2	17.7	18.0

Source: AISHE 2019 - 20

It is evident from the table that, currently (as per AISHE 2019 - 20) there has been increase in the overall female GER figure as also female GER for SC category. But female GER is very low for ST category. As it is this section of population is quite vulnerable, low female GER limits their economic opportunities and hinders their job prospects. All these factors, in turn, wield negative influence on their empowerment as a whole.

Gender Parity Index (GPI) in Higher Education

Gender Parity Index (GPI) in enrolment at any level of education is the ratio of the number of female students enrolled to the number of male students enrolled at that level. A GPI of 1 indicates parity between the sexes or no gender disparity. A GPI that varies between 0 and 1 typically means a disparity in favour of males whereas a GPI greater than 1 indicates a disparity in favour of females.

The GPI values are shown in the table below for general students, SC and ST students. Parity has been attained for the categories All and SC since 2018 - 19 (with GPI values exceeding 1). However, the GPI is still below unity for the category ST which is indicative of the existence of gender disparity against women.

Table 8: Gender Parity Index in Higher Education

Year	All	SC Students	ST Students
2015 - 16	0.92	0.91	0.83
2016 - 17	0.94	0.93	0.85
2017 - 18	0.97	0.96	0.87
2018 - 19	1.00	1.02	0.92
2019 - 20	1.01	1.05	0.97

Source: AISHE 2019 - 20

Out - turn and Pass Percentage

Enrolment figures show gender specific disparity at various levels of higher education. This is quite evident from the indicators that have been studied. However, an interesting point emerges if we take a look at the pass percentages of both male and female students. The table below depicts this.

Table 9: Out - turn / Pass Percentages in Higher Education

Level	Out - turn / Pass Percentage Male	Out - turn / Pass Percentage Female
Ph. D	55.3	44.7
M. Phil	33.0	67.0
Post - Graduation	41.6	58.4
Under Graduate	46.6	53.4
PG Diploma	47.4	52.6
Diploma	58.2	41.8
Certificate	41.9	58.1

Source: Author's Calculations

An interesting observation is female pass percentages exceed that of male in almost all levels except Ph. D. and Diploma. Although male enrolment has been higher than female in these levels, women have outshone men in terms of higher pass percentages.

Teachers in Higher Education

While studying or reviewing the higher education system, it would be pertinent to take a look at the number of male and female teachers.

Table 10: Number of Teachers in Higher Education

Category	Male	Female	Total
All	864337	638819	1503156
SC	85262	49330	134592
ST	21427	15378	36805

Source: AISHE 2019 - 20

It is commonly said that women are better teachers than men. Our statistics on pass percentages have also revealed

women to be better performers than men in most levels of higher education. However, it is quite surprising that number of female teachers is much lower than their male counterparts; and this is true across all social groups as well.

We present yet other statistics on the posts occupied by female teachers in higher educational institutes.

Table 11: Post wise Female Teachers in Higher Education

Post	No. of Females	Female Teachers as Percentage of Total
Professor & Equivalent	38478	27.5
Reader & Associate Professor	59485	37.1
Lecturers/ Assistant Professors	440288	43.0
Demonstrator/ Tutor	52522	65.5
Temporary Teachers	41569	48.9
Visiting Teachers	6477	44.4

Source: AISHE 2019 - 20 7 Author's Calculations

The table reveals that in all the important posts in higher educational institutes, viz., Professor, Associate Professor and Assistant Professor, there is gross disparity against women. Thus, in spite of better educational pass percentages, employability of women in the higher education sector is still quite limited.

2. Conclusion

Women are denied economic and social privileges at every stage of life and these act as constraints in their enrolment in higher education. Meagre women enrolment figures highlight persistence of gender - based asymmetry in the society. Women, by virtue of their position, are quite vulnerable in the society. In fact, women in higher education are mostly those who are endowed with higher social status and belong to higher income and social brackets. The figures on women enrolment depict that women are significantly under - represented in higher education as compared to their male counterparts. This is indicative of confinement of women within the household, curtailment of their rights and decision - making power as also deprivation and exploitation, all of which retard the empowerment potential of women.

Although gender gap in literacy has come down over the years, yet, a lot still remains to be done in transforming this into a fruitful demographic dividend. Until and unless GER values improve across all social groups, disparities would continue to plague the higher education arena. Gender specific ideologies are responsible for continued wide gaps in female enrolment in higher education. In fact, attainment of gender parity and women empowerment are critical challenges for a country like India wherein values and ideologies reflect strong biases against women. As evident from our study, in spite of lower female enrolment figures, female pass percentages are much higher. This aptly demonstrates their capability in higher education and if they are given the right opportunity, they can be fruitfully absorbed in the country's productive labour force. It is indeed surprising that even with higher academic pass percentages than men, their employment in the higher education sector is quite limited. In all posts in higher

education, women teachers are outnumbered by their male counterparts.

However, it is imperative for us to note that mere statistics of enrolment rates do not necessarily reveal the true picture with regard to gender disparities in the higher education system. Access to quality education and equality of opportunities for women is an urgent need. Needless to say, a well - balanced higher education system with gender parity in terms of all indicators can appropriately cater to the development needs of a growing economy like India.

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