

Disparity and Social Exclusion of Women in Higher Education

Dr. Nisha Yadav¹

¹Assistant Professor (Geography) Km. Mayawati Govt. Girls P.G. College, Badalpur, Gautam Budha Nagar

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Abstract

Education is the most fundamental factor to measure the level of development of a country. Education not only increase knowledge and skills that enable human being to improve economic development but also produces values, ideas, and attitudes which act as the agents of economic and social change.

Today, education is considered as the single most important means for individuals to improve personal endowments, capacity building, subdue constraints and in the process, enlarge their available set of opportunities and choices for a sustained improvement in well-being.

In India, women are generally characterized by low literacy, ignorance, low income and low social status. Gender based disparity in education is more prevalent among the weaker sections of social system. Education particularly higher education is the only means that can give them the capacity to come out from the vicious circle.

Key Words: Advocacy, Constraints, Customs, Disparity, Drop out, Emancipation, Endowments, Enrolment, Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), Hypergamous Marriage, Inequality, Patriarchal Exogamy, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Stagnant, Wastage

Introduction

Education empowers women to take challenges, excel along with their counterpart, get recognition and respect and exercise their power. It further empowers to women to step into the job market where they have greater command over resources.

But there is gender disparity at every level of education in India. The gender disparity has been institutionalised with the socio-cultural factors with years of civilization. Although many efforts have been made by the Government to reduce disparity and to promote women in higher education inter alia establishment of universities during British time under Wood's dispatch in the year 1854, formation of various commission such as, S. Radha Krishnan Commission, Kothari commission and through constitutional amendment, yet the gendered disparity in education still exist at every level. The gender disparity in higher education is magnified among weaker sections of the society such as scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward classes.

For instance, (Sanjeer Alam :2007) has pointed out that gender is the most important factor for viewing disparities in education. He has included both girls' and women's education in a stratified society and has found that among some social groups, women are well educated, while in some other groups, they are lagging behind such as the scheduled castes and Muslims. It is the fact that the disparity is most prominent among Muslims among the social groups.

The gender disparity in higher education is linked with the dropout of girls at school level. In India, due socio-economic and cultural and parental attitudes, girls have not been promoted for education. The popular saying "*bringing up a daughter is like watering a plant in another's courtyard*" (Leela Dube: 1988), seems to be

true in the Indian context. The practice of dowry and the ideology of hypergamous marriage are also influential in large parts of India. In communities with low level of male education, parents are often apprehensive about educating a daughter for the fear of being unable to find a suitably educated groom. And still this myth persists in many parts of India. (**Sugeeta Upadhyay:2007**) has elaborated wastage in education in India. As per her, the first wastage is due to stagnation and dropouts. She states that those students, who do not complete the course on time, contribute to wastage in education due to stagnation and the students, who dropout of the course without completion, give rise to the wastage. Another kind of wastage is due to non-utilization of educational skills. The students who after the completion of courses either do not utilize the training skills or are not able to utilise training due to lack of opportunities, causes another type of wastage.

Further, many studies have shown that economic growth has no link with women education. For examples, many of the states like Haryana and Punjab have higher economic growth but there is gender disparity in education. For Instance, (**Tilak and Chaudhary :2019**), has discussed the neo-classical concepts that investments in higher education have led to economic growth and development. However, the authors explained that the even economic growth does not ensure inclusive development among the rich and the poor. They stated that economic growth among the various social groups and among women has not led to the removal of inequality particularly in enrolment in higher education.

Hence, it is indispensable to discuss the factors affecting enrolment of women in higher education. There are wide disparities in enrolment ratio between rural and urban areas. In 2011, the Gross Enrolment Ratio for rural and urban areas stood at 17.60 percent and 35.33 percent including the enrolment in the vocational institutes. Therefore, the gross enrolment Ratio (GER) in urban areas is almost two times higher as compared to rural areas. If we consider only women's education, the percentage of women in higher education in rural areas is very less which is only 13.48 percent including women's enrolment in the vocational institutes. Further, along with the low enrolment in higher education, the problem of dropouts and the problems of wastage in higher education have always been given space for discussions.

Although the Indian Constitution has guaranteed "equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, irrespective of sex, age, race or religion", the rights guaranteed by law are yet to be legalized in customs due to several factors viz; economic, social, as well as the historical prejudices etc. that act as bottlenecks. The reasons for this low level of enrolment have been well explained by the renowned Professor of Welfare Economics, **Amartya Sen**. According to him, this low level of enrolment in India, particularly in the case of women's enrolment, can easily be explained by understanding the following factors-

1. Gender division of labour
2. Norm of patriarchal exogamy
3. The practice of dowry and an ideology of hypergamous marriage

In India, women's education is understood by many parents as uncertain values and most emphasis is given to make her a domestic expert. The parents do not give much attention to the education of the girl child due to this view of gender division of labour. The norms of patriarchal exogamy prevalent in large parts of India have affected and further undermined the economic incentives. This can strongly reduce the perceived value of female education, at least from the point of view of the parental interest.

The Government of India has tried to reduce inequality through various measures such as 42nd constitutional amendment; a step in the area of equal distribution of education among all. Before this amendment, education

was in the state list which was placed in the concurrent list by this amendment. The Central Government was also given the key role for the equal distribution of education so that the imbalances in regions and among the society may be removed. This amendment also introduced some key words in the Constitution. The words *socialist*, *secular* and *integrity* were added in the preamble. The word *socialist* was added for the inclusive development so that fruits of the development could reach to every citizen of India. The amendment was made to focus on the Other Backwards Classes, minorities, Scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs) so that the social justice could be ensured for the holistic development of the country. Further, Kothari Commission 1964), emphasized on the need for removal of disparities and lack of opportunities for SCs, STs, women, handicapped, certain minority groups and some educationally deprived or backward classes.

Through these measures taken by the government, the disparity in education has been reduced but still there is gap between men and women. This gender disparity in education varies from region to region due to various socio and norms of cultural differences. It is pertinent to point out that while India has the second largest system of higher education, after USA; the total number of students only represents 27.99 percent of the relevant age group, i.e. among 18 –23 years as per the Census of India 2011, which is lower than the average enrolment in developed countries, that is about 54.6 percent (**UGC Report: 2008**). In 2020, 935 universities including 50 Central, 409 State, 127 Deemed Universities, and 349 private Universities Institutions of National Importance and 42,388 colleges have been included in the Higher Education sector.

During the academic session 2018-19, the total enrolment in all courses and levels in regular stream had been 373.99 lakhs including 181.90 lakh women students' constituting 48.64 percent of the total enrolled (**U.G.C-Report 2020**). In terms of percentages, as compared to total enrolment in higher education, women's enrolment had been the highest in the state of Kerala with 58.9 percent, followed by Meghalaya with 54.61 percent and the lowest percentage of 42.72 percent in the state of Bihar. It means that there is still a huge chunk of women population that is untouched by the higher education.

Although, it is true that there is progress in enrollment of women in higher education but they are still having less opportunity for their emancipation and for self-development. There are regional variations in enrolment. Further, the disparity still persists in extreme form among the social groups particularly among the weaker section.

Various studies show that the disparity in higher education is the highest among Scheduled caste and Muslims. Considering the persistence of gender disparity in education, the approach paper of Eleventh Five Year Plan had emphasized on universalization of secondary education and equality in education by gender, caste and socio-economic group and depletion of regional disparity in educational development. Now, the Government has focused to address these vulnerabilities and disparities through various policies and schemes.

Conclusions- Despite the various efforts by the Government, the gender disparity in higher education still persists. This gender disparity in higher education is one of the biggest bottlenecks for women development and emancipation. Therefore, it is necessary that the awareness campaign and proper advocacy plan should be there at community level for promoting girls' education.

Reduce in dropouts at elementary level will enhance enrolment in higher education. Government alone cannot make much change in women education. Hence, the role of Government, civil society, academics and the community are equally important for removing the disparity in higher education.

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