

WOMEN AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "If you educate the man, you educate the person but if you educate the woman, you educate the nation". One of the most significant transformations in education in India over the past several decades is the drastic increase in women's access to colleges and universities. In contrast, the presence of a critical mass of women in the decision-making process remains vastly inadequate. Also, a number of cultural barriers still exist which seriously impedes their development as citizens and professionals. Higher education is recognized as a powerful instrument of socioeconomic advancement of the society in general and a vehicle for upward social mobility for deprived and marginalized sections in particular. The deprived sections of the society, especially women, have had limited access to higher education. Education, especially higher, has been recognized as a great equalizer and a powerful tool of upward social mobility capable of being used for reducing socioeconomic disparities and building an inclusive society. An educated woman has the skills, the self-confidence and the power to be a better citizen. Women have all the power and capacity as that of men and they are manifesting themselves amongst different opportunities provided through higher education. This paper aims to highlight the issues related to women in higher education.

Key Words: Women, Higher Education, Access, Empowerment, Self-confidence, Opportunities

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is the one characteristic which distinguishes human beings from other beings. We are endowed with a tremendous capacity to acquire and transfer knowledge from one generation to another and this capacity has gained prominence with the advance in science and technology. Higher education is the gateway to economic security and opportunity particularly for women in India. Women are part of the socio-economic system and they uphold rich cultural and traditional values. Their progress is equated with the progress of the nation. Many Indian women play a major role as leaders. They address issues such as Equity, Quality, Relevance and Access and generate ideas to support economic growth and improve quality of life of women in India. Women do become contributing members of society through learning. The Indian Government has introduced policies and procedures with the goal of sensitizing the higher education system, recognising gender equity and increasing the number of women enrolling for higher education. Higher education for women in India has witnessed an impressive growth over the years but much needs to be done to promote female education at all levels.

STATUS OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN INDIA

A number of studies have revealed that uneducated women have high-level of mortality, low potential for earning, poor dietary status and little independence in the household. The lack of education also has a drastic effect on health and well-being of the kids. In India, the infant mortality rate was negatively related to the mother's educational level. In addition, the absence of education can bring a negative change in the country's development

Women's education is a multi-faceted factor that can be held responsible for the low rate of education among women in India. The social, demographic, political and economic factors are the backbone of low or high literacy rate. The low acceptance of girls in schools is one of the main reasons, which has become a hurdle in the way of women's liberation in India. According to reliable sources, 50% of all girls have never been to school. The dropout rate is another factor that prevails in India, especially in low-lying areas, slums and the tribal areas. According to sources, the dropout rate of girls is almost twice as that of boys. Another cause of India's lack of literacy is that females are considered as a burden on the family and believed to be inferior to males. In the majority of families, girls play the role of second mother by taking on the

responsibilities such as looking after siblings, firewood collection, bringing fodder, bringing water, cattle handling and cooking. In some parts of India, parents discourage the girls' education due to sexual harassment and dishonor.

Discrimination against women and girls is a pervasive and long-running phenomenon that characterises Indian society at every level. India's position on rankings such as the Gender Development Index has been disappointing, despite fairly rapid rates of economic growth. Crimes against women are showing an upward trend, in particular brutal crimes such as rapes, dowry deaths, and honour killings. These trends are disturbing.

Cultural institutions in India play a central role in perpetuating gender inequality and ideas about gender-appropriate behaviour. A culturally ingrained parental preference for sons - emanating from their importance as caregivers for parents in old age - is linked to poorer consequences for daughters. The dowry system, involving a cash or in-kind payment from the bride's family to the groom's at the time of marriage, is another institution that disempowers women. This often results in dowry-related violence against women by their husbands and in-laws if the dowry is considered insufficient or as a way to demand more payments. These practices create incentives for parents not to have girl children or to invest less in girls' health and education. Such parental preferences are reflected in increasingly masculine sex ratios in India. This reinforces the inferior status of Indian women and puts them at risk of violence in their marital households. According to the National Family and Health Survey, 37% of married women have been victims of physical or sexual violence perpetrated by their spouse.

In 2015, 3.7 million eligible girls were out of school and in rural areas girls receive an average of fewer than four years of education. In a country where 21.9% of the population is below its official poverty limit, it does not come as a surprise that poverty is the major obstacle that limits education for girls.

But poverty is not the only thing that is disrupting the fundamental right of education amongst Indian girls there are many more contributing factors such as the distance of schools from the corresponding villages, lack of sanitation facilities in schools, shortage of female teachers, gender bias in curriculum, absence of support from their respective families and this list is never ending. There's a common belief among rural households that girls should stop schooling after reaching puberty. India has the highest number of child brides in Asia and inevitably there is this dogma surrounding young girls that educating them is a waste of time and money as they are born only to be married off and manage the household. In rural households and especially amongst the poor, the girl child is a valuable resource for housework and in the fields, an additional hand that cannot be wasted away through an education and far too heavy a price that most rural and poor families cannot afford to pay.

India is ranked 105 amongst 128 countries in its Education for All Development Index. There is much work to be done to enhance education in India. Special attention needs to be given to improve women's access to education. An attempt has to be made to remove the social, psychological and structural barriers, for the participation of the majority of women in education. It is absolutely vital that we incorporate the belief among women that they must be economically independent and the only feasible way to achieve this is through education and its proper utilisation.

ROLE OF EDUCATION IN IMPROVING THE CONDITION OF WOMEN

Education is considered as the most important tool for empowering women in our society. It is not only limited to developing the personality of an individual, but also plays an important role in economic, social and cultural development.

The role of women in the education system can play a big part in the society. The factors like cultural, social, political and technological changes in the world have revolutionized the education and social life of women. Female education will bring improvement in child's health. This is due to the fact that the well-educated mother will know the importance of hygiene and healthy food. One thing that can be seen through female's education is that they are married at a later age, which means low fertility and less birth rate.

Higher education for women is the most powerful means to evolve through the current economic and social crisis in India and to teach her children the art of thinking and analysis before entering the school for education. It leads a woman to "Complete living" with self-confidence and helps the women not only in gaining knowledge but also enables her to earn a living. An educated woman plays an important role in a family, dealing with both health care and financial support to the family. Higher education helps women to have a better understanding of

social and political processes beyond the home and makes her a wise citizen with effective social and political action. Complete living includes, being physically strong, earning a living, being a responsible parent and an earnest citizen. Higher education helps women to be mentally and emotionally stronger and to face challenges and overcome obstacles in life and be a complete woman.

We aim to foster a gender-inclusive culture through education, including higher education, in order to promote sustainable human development and peace. The key dimensions of human development have become: empowerment, co-operation, equity, sustainability and security. The commitment to these goals can only be possible if effective partnerships are formed to construct a more human society. This emphasis on dialogue, on coalition and on collaboration forms the basis of the new approach to development strategy and requires full participation from the relevant actors involved - that is to say, from men and women. Clearly rapid change must occur and the role of education, notably as an investment in human capital, is an essential aspect of this challenge where men and women have equal responsibility. Against this background, the thorough and far-reaching renovation of education systems has gained considerable support as one effective way to tackle social problems - old and new. National policy-makers must ensure that the access to and participation of women in education at all stages of their lives is safeguarded and facilitated.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND WOMEN IN INDIA

The most assured path towards women's empowerment is to assign leadership posts in society in greater numbers to women. Participation of women in the decision-making process will inevitably lead to their empowerment. Education facilitates empowerment which is essential for the participation of women in all aspects of the development process. Furthermore, higher education provides the expertise usually required for the key posts which shape policy in all fields. Thus it is obvious that higher education is particularly important for women.

Various studies have identified the principal barriers which have prevented the participation of women in the decision-making process. Some of them are limited access to education, especially higher education; discriminatory appointment and promotion practices; the stresses of dual family and professional roles; family attitudes; career interruptions; cultural stereotyping; absence of adequate policies and legislation to ensure the participation of women.

Given these obstacles, solutions to remedy the exclusion of women lie in a reversal of these trends by means of wider access to education, notably higher education, review of appointment and promotion procedures, provision of legislative and infra-structure support in all professions and of special programmes for women and a genuine change in attitude towards full gender equality and institutional and governmental support through clear and effective policies which are actually enforced.

The past 20 years have witnessed significant - but not sufficient - enrolment of the female population in higher education. In general, women's enrolments have improved and may even exceed those of men. From the economic standpoint, higher education qualifications effectively raise both employment prospects and social expectations of graduates. Thus, it is high time to promote more enlightened attitudes towards highly educated women whose qualifications entitle them to career fulfillment. They require appropriate support in the management of personal and professional duties.

CONCLUSION

Women's economic empowerment is central to the national priority of inclusive economic growth. Investing in women's economic empowerment sets a direct path towards gender equality, poverty eradication and inclusive economic growth. The inclusion of women and girls in the economy and the provision of safe working and public spaces must be accompanied by measures to prevent violence against women and girls, and enable them to participate fully in society and contribute to the health and prosperity of their communities.

Young people need to develop the attitudes, agency, skills and behaviour to access and demand information and services to be safe, healthy, to end discrimination and violence, especially against girls, and to help create and sustain a civil society with investments that promote an enabling environment. They must be key partners in shaping new gender inclusive policies and behaviour that can challenge gender stereotypes and norms.

The government needs to prioritize ending violence against women and introduce special measures to combat trafficking of women and girls, domestic violence, and sexual harassment. It needs to step up efforts to introduce and integrate gender in policy programming. Skill and employment programmes for women, along with microfinance services should be made accessible to the underprivileged rural women in distant corners of the country. Legislation to address sexual harassment, domestic violence and unequal remuneration should also be strengthened.

There is clearly a need for policy initiatives to empower women as gender disparities in India persist even against the backdrop of economic growth. For India to maintain its position as a global growth leader, more concerted efforts at local and national levels, and by the private sector are needed to bring women to parity with men. While increasing representation of women in the public spheres is important, an attitudinal shift is essential for women to be considered as equal within their homes and in broader society. Educating Indian children from an early age about the importance of gender equality could be a meaningful start in that direction.

In conclusion, what is now required is a common vision of social and human development shared by men and women alike. This vision is based on social justice and accords women their rightful place in decision-making. *"The essential task of the 21st century may well be to forge a new partnership between men and women in dealing with the present and in shaping the future of our personal and public agendas."* (A Blueprint to Leadership: 19). According to this vision, all leaders - whether male or female - become key agents of change for the creation of a new society. Therefore, they are no longer adversaries but full and equal partners in this important endeavour.

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