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RURAL WOMEN AND HIGHER EDUCATION: OPPORTUNITIES AND INTERVENTIONS

Ms. Raisa Cardozo

Assistant Professor

Department of Sociology

Rosary College of Commerce and Arts, Navelim, Goa (India)

Abstract: Empowering rural women is the key to the development. India surely poses a great challenge to cater to the educational needs of its huge population. This paper makes an attempt to analyze the situation of the rural women and education with regards to the existing opportunities and to provide interventions.

Our country stands in need to recognize rural women as an essential work force. Factors like socio-economic conditions and parental attitude play a vital role in rural women's education. The national literacy rate stands at 74.04% of which male literacy is 82.14% and the female literacy is 65.46% according to 2011 census. The inter-educational gap is profound as the women in rural areas are not encouraged to pursue higher education. There are various factors which cause decreased participation of rural women in higher education, such as, inadequate school facilities, inadequate sanitary facilities, lack of female teachers.

Women in rural areas constituted to a large portion of workforce especially in the agriculture. However, the participation of women handling agricultural machinery, marketing, technical and professional roles in agriculture are hardly evident. Women in rural India are by large dependent individuals. Self-sufficiency is a rare phenomenon amongst rural women of India. If the right interventions are made, the empowered women will not only become self sufficient but also will add to the development of the country. Education will bring them the awareness of their right and open the employment prospects.

Index Terms: Rural, Education, Rural Women, Suggestions

I. INTRODUCTION

Education is a key to nation's progress. Free and compulsory education to all children between the ages of 6 to 14 is a fundamental right of citizens under the 86th Amendment of the Constitution of India. However, even decades of independence later, India is still struggling to achieve success in female literacy. Although, various efforts are made by the government to improve female literacy, the barriers towards women's education are not always economic.

Various schemes have been introduced to improve the quality of education and to make education more accessible. Amongst them are the universalization of elementary education, schemes like mid-day meals and other incentive schemes. In most of these schemes, attention has been given to women's education. However, despite these varied attempts of the government and various NGOs, there is still a lot to be achieved in the field of women's education. According to the 2011 census data, national literacy rate is 74.04% while male literacy is 82.14% and female literacy is 65.46%.

The status of women in society will not improve as long as the disparity that exists in education between male and female minimizes. Along with the accessibility the quality of education also needs to be paid attention to. Women face difficulty to access the education for various reasons like huge distance to cover to get to the school, insecurities of parents to send girls to co-ed schools, lack of sanitary facilities and so on. These issues may dropouts. According to the National Council for Teachers' Education an estimated 1.2 million additional teachers were required to fulfill the demands of RTE act.

1.1 Objectives:

1. To study the present status of women literacy in rural-urban India.
2. To make a comparison between the trends in 2001 and 2011 census specifically with regards to women's education in rural India.
3. To identify the challenges that rural women face in attaining higher education in India.
4. To suggest interventions pertaining to the third objective.

1.2 Methodology:

The study uses secondary sources of data including census of India 2001 and 2011 to compare literacy status. A descriptive data analysis is used in this study.

II. INITIATIVES FOR WOMEN'S HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

The government of India has made efforts to improve the quality of women's education. The 11th Five Year Plan focused on the women's higher education for the first time in history. It made provision for women's hostel. The 11th Five Year Plan aimed the increase in Gross Educational Enrollment of women students in the age group of 18-24. The main objective was to reduce the educational inequalities and to provide due support to the student to pursue higher education. This opened various schemes, fellowships, hostel facilities, setting up of Equal Opportunity Office in all universities to bring effectiveness. However, in spite of all these efforts not great changes in the enrollment of the female student was seen. This phenomenon directs towards the cultural barriers along with socio-economic barriers that women face in order to pursue higher education.

Until, the 12th Five Year Plan there has not been any dramatic change regarding the issue. Perhaps, it may be favorably said that 5 years is not enough to bring a dramatic improvement in such a dilapidated system. So, we have to wait for a more. despite this fact what is more important for us is to co-operate with our government through our participatory effort in making our system more healthy and enthusiastic. For this we have to overcome our traditional and narrow mindset against higher education of females. What is obviously visible is cultural social and economic factors that prevent girls from availing the opportunities of education, hence, each citizen has a responsibility along with government's efforts to improve the same.

2.1 Difficulties Rural Women face in Pursuing Higher Education

India is a patriarchal society. Women in India occupy the secondary position. Women's education too receives little attention. The education of women is low and this directly reflects on the status of women. The sons are given preference over girls. This is evident with the declining sex ratio in India, female foeticide and female infanticide. The males on the other hand are expected to get home dowry from their brides. Women are also viewed as the *Pariah Dhan* which means that a woman is 'someone else's property'. Also women's safety is become a matter of great concern in India. In such cases many families find reasons to invest less on women's education and more on men's. In rural areas this is even stronger due to the economic difficulties and parents are left to choose between the son's education and daughter's education. The lack of institutional facilities also foster the decreased number of rural women's enrollment in higher education along with the problems of accessibility. Many a times it is inconvenient to travel to far off places when the education institutions are situated at distant locations. Poor quality of education available in rural areas demotivates women from pursuing it. Also many families do not allow their girls to stay independently away from their homes. All these factors contribute in decreasing the enrollment of women in higher education.

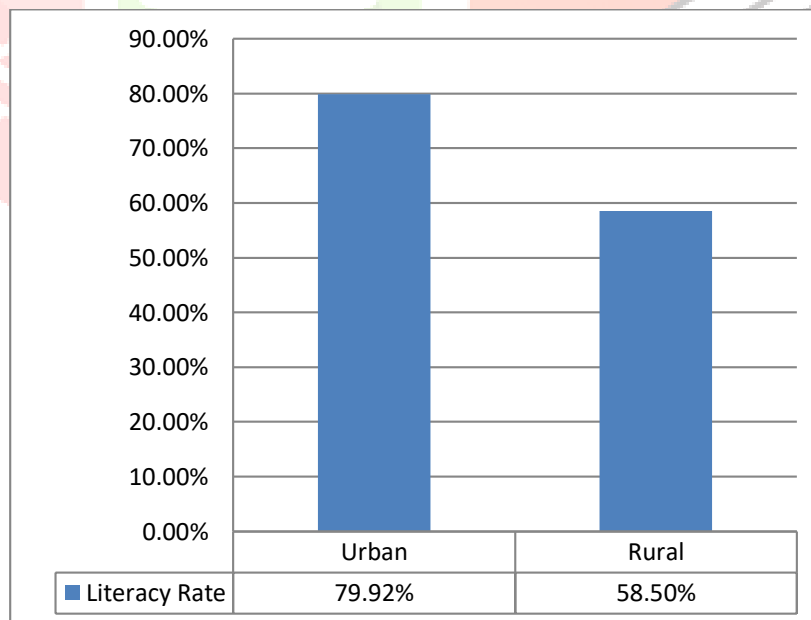


Figure 2.1: intra education gap of women 2011 census

Figure 2.1 highlights the rural-urban gap in higher education. Census 2011 has revealed these statistics which prove that not just between males and females (see Fig: 2.2), but, also the intra educational gap exists among women. This is alarming situation as the country aims at development of all sectors and the rural women's literacy rate is just 58.50%.

It is also noteworthy to mention that compared to male literacy, the pace of overall female literacy has been higher. In 2001 census male literacy was 75.26% and in 2011 census it was 82.14% with the difference of 6.88%. In the case of female literacy in 2001 it was 53.67% and in 2011 it came to 65.46% with the difference of 11.79% (Fig: 2.2) implying that female literacy rate increases at a higher pace compared to male literacy and women are more receptive to education.

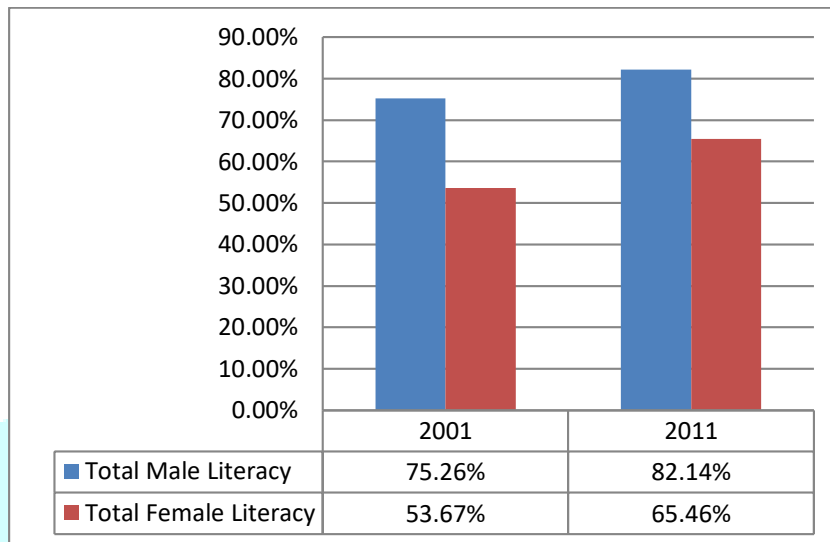


Figure 2.2: comparison of literacy rates 2001 -2011

III. SUGGESTIONS FOR PROMOTING WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

3.1 Economic interventions:

- Introduce scholarships and fellowship for financially backward students.
- Ease out the procedures for availing bank loans for women wanting to pursue higher education.

3.2 Interventions in educational arenas:

- Curriculum should be accommodative of skill based learning.

3.4 Socio-cultural and indirect Interventions:

- Provide counseling for both family and student; as the major decisions are still taken by parents in Indian society. This is mainly due to the fact that even after completion of higher education women do not get in job market.
- Improve transport facilities for women students and also reduce overcrowding in the buses so the women feel secure and safe while traveling.
- Sexual harassment within the institution should strictly be dealt with.

Conclusion

One of the most important factors in increasing the requirements for ensuring increased participation of women in education is changing the mindset of society. Government through social advertisements on radio and television should publicize in order to create awareness. Government and the non-governmental organizations should sensitize and bring awareness of the existing schemes and the scholarships available for the women, also they should try and inform the career prospect to the rural women so they will have vision for themselves. Some proportion of foreign scholarships/fellowships should be reserved and extended specifically to the rural women.

Parents too should be given awareness on the education of women especially to the parents of the girl child so they will not force the girl to discontinue her education due to economic conditions.

Education should provide skills to the women so they have easy access to employment opportunities.

Cottage and small scale industries should be given importance as women can excel here and this will bring overall development of rural area resulting in an increased demand for higher education.

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