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**THE ROLE OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS: GENDER INEQUALITY  
IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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**Abstract**

This paper primarily focuses on the issue of gender inequality in higher education in India. Gender inequality in higher education is a complex issue that affects many facets of Indian culture. In this study, an effort has been made to look at the socio-economic factors that lead to this phenomenon. The purpose of this article is to look at the reasons behind the gender gap in higher education among Indian youngsters. It attempts to draw attention to the significant role that socio-economic and cultural norms play in keeping women underrepresented in India's higher education system. Indian women who pursue higher education have the potential to become self-sufficient, well-adjusted, and capable of significantly impacting their nation's progress. To create the environment in which women may live and thrive, it is imperative that the value of women's education be more widely acknowledged in society.

**Keywords:** Bias, Higher Education, Inequality, Socio-economic factors, Culture

**1. Introduction**

The aspect of women's empowerment has become a global issue, particularly since the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Women's participation in economic activities, politics, and the public sector is lower than that of their male counterparts, owing mostly to a dearth of female education. Education is essential for women's empowerment and gender equality, yet millions of women worldwide lack access to it. The gap between genders in schooling has always existed. In the majority of the world's cultures, females have historically and still are at a disadvantage. The identities of gender and sex are distinct. They have radically distinct meanings for their own terms. However, these two terms are frequently used as synonyms in everyday conversation. It is important to define gender to comprehend it. Gender refers to the social and psychological

behaviours that a person acquires because of socialization, whereas sex is described as the biological or physical trait that determines a person as either male or female (Plhakova & Pavelkova, 2007). Stated differently, gender refers to the socially constructed attributes of men and women as opposed to the biologically established attributes that are classified as "sex." Gender is the social component of sex; it is dynamic and changes depending on culture, social class, family, socioeconomic status, work and income, and developmental stage both locally and globally, as well as during times of crisis or calamity.

Furthermore, it may be stated that the past 50 years have seen significant shifts in the history of Indian economic development. India is now classified as a developing nation rather than a less developed one. However, there is harsh criticism in the literature for the actions done by the Indian government, especially in the social sector. Critics contend that India's social sector performance has been far from adequate since independence and that more might have been accomplished if appropriate policy measures had been taken. In terms of policy, the actions implemented in the field of education since 1990 such as promoting privatization or offering cost-share financing to public universities have a significant impact on the equitable features of the nation's higher education system.

As an investment in human resources, higher education is seen as the most beneficial since it produces trained labor that is focused on development. A college degree is a vital instrument for social and personal development. Individuals who pursue higher education benefit themselves as well as the country. A country can't be considered developed if just a small portion of its upper classes have formal education. It can only be deemed developed if education is provided to every segment of the population. Therefore, discrimination and structural disparities in gender inequality should be eliminated to make higher education inclusive. Equity and equality should also be encouraged. Equal chances for men and women to participate in and gain from education should be offered, and the gender viewpoint should be included into the educational system. Women should be meaningfully included in the educational system and gender mainstreaming should be the goal to increase access to higher education and promote equity.

## **2. Conceptual Frameworks of Gender**

A person's gender is defined by the lifestyle that society, particularly culture, has produced or constructed for them. Gender identity is an individual's own designation of gender. The idea of sex must be taken into consideration while discussing gender. The biological composition of a person's reproductive system is known as their sex. Many academics and activists have questioned the gender viewpoint that perpetuates social inequity and marginalization. Gender disparity and inequality are not new issues in India or the rest of the globe. Gender inequality suggests that men and women ought to be treated differently in social, political, economic, and cultural spheres.

However, the government has recently established laws, policies, programs, and amendments to support women and provide them with equal opportunities to males. Moreover, it may be mentioned that there are several instances, where the government's laws and policies have worked successfully for women (for example, at higher education institutions, the ratio of enrolled girls has increased compared to previous records). However, in other situations, women face several challenges, including poor educational outcomes, difficulty making decisions in the home, in politics, and in formal institutions, as well as economic, cultural, and social weaknesses.

## **3. Why Gender Perspective?**

Women's educational, economic, environmental, and health statuses dictate the necessity for a gender viewpoint. Accessing gender equality for men and women also requires overcoming barriers based on gender. Involvement in policy and decision-making processes contributes to the mainstreaming of gender equality. Therefore, obtaining a higher education is crucial to uplifting women who are marginalized in our patriarchal culture.

## **Gender Inequality in Education (Literacy)**

As it comes to career and educational prospects for females in both rural and urban regions, India paints a picture of disparities. The issue of equality remains an illusion because cultural, societal, and economic barriers continue to prohibit girls from having access to educational opportunities. There has been a lot of discussion, controversy, and disagreement

around the position of girls. Even while more and more families are starting to see girls as equals to boys, female children still do not receive the same level of medical, emotional, and educational support as their male counterparts for a variety of cultural and economic reasons. From the beginning, a girl child is perceived as a burden rather than a blessing, carrying a large dowry, and eventually moving into her husband's house. When a girl grows up, she is less likely than a boy to receive food, attention, and emotional support. When she becomes an adult, she is more likely to focus on marriage and motherhood than on realizing her full potential because these are seen as the main objectives of her life, and education is just a means to get there.

#### **4. Gender Inequality in Higher Education**

It has been noted that in a majority of developing nations, girls appear to face more discrimination when it comes to enrolment and access to education at all levels, especially in secondary and higher secondary education (EFA, UNESCO, 2007). According to a few surveys, male students in India outnumbered female students when it came to enrolment in higher education. In terms of overall enrolment in 2002–03, there were 40.05 percent female students and 59.95 percent male students. This indicates that the number of female students enrolled in higher education in India was still behind that of male students.

Furthermore, Chauhan (2011) examined women's participation in higher education in a different study. The goal was to examine gender-based educational disparities across different social sections and evaluate the efficacy of compensatory measures implemented by the federal and state governments to address gender-based issues in higher education. According to the report, the number of women enrolled in postsecondary education climbed from 17,000 in 1950–1951 to 44,66,000 in 2005–2006. From 1950–51 to 2006–07, the gender parity index increased from 0.38 to 0.95. However, the number of women enrolled in higher education varied significantly by state. The lowest percentage of women enrolled was in Bihar (less than 25%), whereas 18 states had higher rates of female participation than the national average, notably Kerala (61%), Goa (59%), and Punjab (52%).

In 2004–05, women from scheduled castes enrolled at a gross enrolment ratio of 6.3%, compared to 9.2% for males from restricted castes. Similarly, women from scheduled tribes and

other backward classes had a gross enrolment ratio of 6.4% and 7.6%, respectively, whereas males from same categories had a ratio of 8.8% and 12.5%. Women in the general category accounted for 14.1% of the gross enrolment ratio, more than twice as high as women from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, and almost twice as high as women from other backward classes. Urban women's gross enrolment ratio (22.6%) was around four times higher than rural women's (5.7%). Regarding women, the enrolment percentages for those from wealthy and impoverished backgrounds were 32.3% and 1.2%, respectively. In India, Muslim women who are impoverished and reside in rural regions have the least access to higher education. Additionally, Muslims have the lowest gross enrolment percentage (6.2%) among all women (Mishra, 2007).

## **5. Determinants Associated with Enrolment in Education**

While concerning school aspects, especially curriculum that has not been tailored to girls' needs and opportunities, distance from secondary school, unsanitary and unsafe conditions inside and outside the school, a curriculum that doesn't take gender into account, subpar teaching and learning methods, and a lack of guidance and counselling services, can all have a significant impact on whether or not girls enroll in and stay in school. Additionally, Bamora (2010) discovered that uneven gender relations, poor educational facilities, unfriendly school environments, and sociocultural ideas and practices have all prevented females from fully participating in formal education.

The factors that determine a student's enrollment in tertiary education may be broadly classified into two groups. The first group is made up of factors that are frequently in charge of the uneven representation of female pupils in the educational system. These issues negatively impact girls' education at every level, including elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education. These factors include those that are social, cultural, economic, institutional, academic, and related to safety and security. The second group consists of the factors that determine their higher technical education. Since these elements appear when the females are qualified for higher education, they are known as situational factors. These variables get more particular in terms of gender when it comes to technical education.

This group includes things like marriage and other patriarchal and cultural restrictions, gender-based stereotypes, more stringent safety, and security requirements for obtaining such education, undue financial strain on families, and assistance and direction for them, among other things.

## **6. Socio-Economic Factors**

While discussing traditions and customs (premature marriage, patriarchy, prejudice, negative perceptions of parents in society) – stereotypes and the larger social environment have an impact on the decision to pursue a profession in science and technology. A few researchers have conducted groundbreaking studies on women in scientific and engineering education, demonstrating the significance of patrifocal family structure and ideology in the underrepresentation of women in these fields. In general, “patrifocality,” or patriarchal society, has shaped women's educational and professional paths in India. It alludes to kinship, family, and ideologies that prioritize males over women and generally suggest that a person is subservient to their family (Gupta, 2020). In fields like science and engineering, where men predominate, there is a greater prevalence of cultural views around gender or gender schemas and stereotypes (Valian, 1999). Research indicates that India's patriarchal culture tends to place less value on women's education because of social and cultural hurdles (Hebbalkar, 2014; Kaaya and Waiganjao, 2015). When it comes to females, parents often decide which academic path to follow.

This choice is motivated by the belief that females should not work or earn money before being married, and that education is only an investment that would be used as a safety net should the daughter end up widowed or abandoned (Basavaraj, 2014). In a culture ruled by males, ladies' education and professional advancement are subordinated to marriage and motherhood. The access of women to education is significantly influenced by social expectations. Parents are usually unwilling to spend their daughters' earnings for their schooling and are obligated to store them for their daughters' marriage.

Consequently, young men are sent to high fees categorized medical or career educational institutions, whereas girls are assigned to low-cost fee structured government colleges (Singh, 2007; Thasniya, 2014). Even females with education are not encouraged to work, and if they are, it's just briefly before marriage (Singh, 2007; Hebbalkar, 2014). Whether or if she will work is up to the groom's family to determine. The parents' interest in their daughters' education also decreases because of the unfavourable effects of higher education. Since she goes home with the groom's family after marriage and the parents do not receive financial compensation for educating their daughters, the future benefits of educating males outweigh those of teaching girls (Bamora, 2010; Soyulu, 2011; Thasniya, 2014).

As the time for marriage draws near, girls will probably also be pulled out of school early in their youth (Brenda, 2014). However, females' access to and involvement in higher education are impacted by the belief that boys' education is an investment. It has been noted by a particular study that gender role socialization and the stereotype-based character of society lead women to feel that they are either unfit to be scientists or engineers or that they are not capable of pursuing these careers. Family influences educational decisions, including choosing a stream of study; fathers have a particularly crucial impact in these decisions.

Decisions are frequently made with gender roles in mind. This is because Indian culture is patriarchal, with middle class and upper caste members serving as the main propagators of patriarchal ideals. Parents' input is frequently gendered when making decisions about their children's education (Gupta, 2012). For example, while choosing a topic for a girl, parents' marital responsibilities are taken into consideration in addition to the family's decision on the daughter's educational path. Therefore, parents must locate a groom who is older and more educated than their daughter to comply with the requirements of hypergamy. It was difficult for parents of professionally educated women in many castes and religions to locate a husband who was both more educated than their daughter and would support her in pursuing a job.

Parents were reluctant to invest in their daughters' academic careers since they believed that their spouse and his family would profit from their education after marriage. Apart from giving the daughters more authority, a professional degree has helped women's parents in recent

years during marriage talks (Gupta, 2015). A daughter who pursues a professional degree benefits her family's reputation and increases her chances of landing a decent career. There is a significant gender disparity in educational attainment because of parents' decisions to enrol their children in school, which have often favored males (Bamora, 2010).

### **7. Family Characteristics (Parents' Profile)**

The primary components of a family's characteristics are the parents' employment, income, social status, and degree of education. According to various research studies, females' access to school may be hampered by their parents' lack of education. Moreover, a few other researchers have noted that parental education has the greatest impact on their children's decision to attend technical schools as opposed to those that focus on the humanities, sciences, or math. The combination of social class and parental education level was found by Tinklin (2000) to be a major factor in encouraging access to higher education in the study on the effect of social background on entry to higher education.

### **Individual Differences, Self Interests and Choices**

It may be mentioned that specific characteristics are significant while choosing a vocation. There is no direct correlation, nor dependence on women's academic success, between the availability of disciplinary options and women's capacity to access them. Social ethics are the primary cause of the explanations given for this. Most women might not be able to freely choose the courses they want to study in school since, in the case of females, parents often decide what academic path to follow. The fact that females are not expected to work or earn money before to marriage and that education is only an investment to be used as a safety net if the daughter becomes a widow or is abandoned serves as the basis for this decision (Chanana, 1988).

The unique responses and experiences of females are shaped by their sociocultural milieu. Most students, regardless of gender, cite personal interest as their reason for enrolling in technical courses (Zahedifar, 2012). In contrast, research revealed that women had decided to pursue science education to a higher degree due to pressure from family members or professors, rather than because they were interested in the area or a particular career path (Mishra, 2007).



## 8. Socio-Economic Status

One of the main things preventing youngsters from having access to higher education is poverty. Another issue confronting low-income parents is that, although realizing the value of education, they frequently lack the financial means to pursue it. If a family is able to send only one child to college, it should be the son. Students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds are less likely to choose higher technical education. They lack confidence and weigh a lot of factors while making decisions, particularly those related to finance. SES also influences a student's decision on which college or university courses to enroll in. Students with high SES levels tend to choose technical education. The situation is worse for female students from low SES backgrounds, who must compete with their male relatives to enroll in postsecondary education. Contrary to the findings of these studies, Basavaraj (2014) shown in her research that a greater proportion of female students from middle class and lower income groups are pursuing higher education, based on the respondents' family income. It demonstrates that women of all economic backgrounds participate equally in higher education. Scholarships and fellowships are a major factor in meeting women's financial demands for higher education. If a family can only afford to send one child to school, it will probably be a male (Brenda, 2014).

Furthermore, it has been surveyed that technical education costs more overall than traditional graduate and post-graduate degrees. The cost of preparatory courses and admission exams for higher education is also quite costly (Kosha et al., 2014). The rising prices provide a problem for students from middle-class and lower-class backgrounds. Even while school loans are a possibility, women, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are less likely to choose them (Nwojiewho and Deebom, 2017). Another element influencing women's higher education is traditional adolescent practices connected to young boys' and girls' growth (Bamora, 2010). Women who pursue tertiary education face subtle environmental problems such as inadequate sanitary facilities, verbal abuse, and sexual harassment, making academic and social life more difficult (Yehualashet, 2010). They tend to impede females' flexibility to pursue higher education (Bamora, 2010). Similarly, prejudice and sex segregation in education arise because of society's cultural and traditional norms and beliefs, which inadvertently support gender disparity.

Distance to school was noted as a significant barrier to girls' and women's education. As previously stated, distance to school may be more essential in education decisions for females than for boys due to cultural differences. (Bellal, 2009). Other factors impeding girls' education in rural locations include physical safety, particularly when they must travel a great distance to school, and fear of sexual harassment (Basavaraj, 2014). While it comes to females' access to school and work in both rural and urban regions, India paints a picture of disparities. There is a definite gap between girls' higher education in rural and urban locations. The girl kid is forced to do domestic and agricultural activities in rural places. Parents are hesitant to send their daughters for further study because of their lack of education and heavy home obligations. The outcome of Basavaraj's (2014) study is wholly different from that of previous research. This study found that the traditional rural culture, inadequate infrastructure, careless administration, and other factors all contributed to the neglect of rural communities. More and more female students are pursuing higher education as a result of rural women's increased awareness of the value of education for women.

#### **9. Institutional Factors:**

The atmosphere of the institution and the services offered to female students are crucial to enrolment. The closeness of colleges ranks first among the facilities. In India, there are about 28 colleges for every lakh eligible people (those in the 18-23 age range) (AISHE, 2016–17). State-by-state variations exist, with the average number of colleges in north India being significantly lower than in other regions. Parents are less likely to want to send their girl kid to college if it is distant from home. Girls' school attendance is adversely affected by the distance from home to school than boys' is because parents are more worried about their daughters' safety on the way to school because of sexual harassment. The percentage of female students attending colleges is also impacted by other amenities, such as small class sizes and poor sanitation and cleanliness.

One of the most pressing worries for parents is the safety of their daughters on college premises. The presence of female teachers typically alleviates parental worries about their daughters' safety. In India's higher education institutions, approximately 59.4% of instructors are male and 40.6% are female. There are 68 female teachers for every 100 male teachers in India

(AISHE, 2016-17). In North Indian states, this percentage is lower. Female teachers are in insufficient supply at co-educational technical institutes. The aspect of girls' enrolment and retention in higher education are significantly impacted by the presence of female lecturers, safe spaces for female students, separate restrooms, and sanitary amenities.

### **Gender Stereotypes in Subjects and Disciplinary Choices**

According to a study, boys and girls are enrolled in general education and technical education programs at higher education levels based on their orientations toward masculinity and femininity (Gautam, 2015). Research findings from studies by Bamora (2010) and Chanana (2007) show that gender continues to be the primary determinant of students' choice of course and career. Moreover, it has been noted that teachers still focus more on teaching boys maths, science, and technology than they do on teaching girls, even in spite of initiatives to encourage girls to pursue careers in the sciences through the science and math clinics. The entire impact of the unequal treatment a girl receives from her parents and from instructors through the formal and concealed curriculum is seen in the topics they select and the jobs they eventually pursue.

Gender stereotypes have a significant impact on how men and women are conceptualized and help to create societal categories for gender. These categories offer explanations of what people believe women and men should be in addition to descriptions of how people think about girls and boys. Rationality, science, and technology are typically linked with masculinity in patriarchal civilizations, which includes most of the world's societies. As a result, males are typically viewed as the natural managers of this knowledge and the natural players in both commerce and science.

As a result, it is seldom disputed that men can get higher education and use it to pursue occupations that allow them to support their families and contribute to society by working in the workforce. Regarding women's usage and access to higher education, this does not appear to be the case. Women's disciplinary decisions have been the subject of discussion in the feminist discourse on gender and education. Many a researcher has written extensively about the patriarchal influence on women's disciplinary decisions in higher education as well as the division of fields into feminine and masculine categories. The underlying presumptions about

topic or disciplinary choices, as well as their direct relationship to women's status in society, must be revealed because masculinity and femininity are social constructs. Indian students grow up in a culture that normalizes women's inferior position.

Constant exposure to gender roles that are markedly different from one another is likely to mould students' perceptions of how well men and women perform in a range of areas. While behaviours determine gender roles, ideas and attitudes regarding masculinity and femininity define gender stereotypes. The primary cause of the masculinity in the engineering field is the exclusion of women from the engineering culture. According to Faulkner (2009), women engineers are both extremely conspicuous as women and invisible as engineers. Because girls have less preference, there are relatively few of them enrolled in professional/technical education, which mostly comprises of engineering, medicine, management, computers, etc. They find these courses challenging because they did not have a solid science foundation in primary and higher secondary school levels.

### **Effect of Economic Policies**

The issue of gender disparity has become much more pronounced after privatization. For social and economic reasons, women from disadvantaged backgrounds poor and rural women in particular are denied access to professional education. As a result, since general education courses are more accessible and affordable than professional courses, more women are enrolling in them. Compared to general education, professional education necessitates a longer time commitment and a larger cost outlay. Many women enrol in general courses because they provide them the chance to advance their careers while they wait for the ideal partner for marriage. Second, because they are expected to spend money on their daughters' marriages, parents could be reluctant to pay for their daughters' education.

Indian custom dictates that when a female gets married, her parents must provide money and presents to the groom's family. The themes chosen have been impacted by market demand and economic liberalization. These factors allow these studies to be separated into specialties that are associated with men and women. For instance, conventional courses in the humanities, social sciences, and arts have historically been perceived as feminine fields. Conversely, engineering,

law, and commerce are viewed as masculine fields. Thus, the gender gap in higher technical education has widened because of the commercialization of higher education. According to various studies, there is a notion in science of "soft" vs "hard" employment, which may encourage women to choose the soft fields.

### **Government Policies**

Following this it may be stated that the University Grants Commission established many initiatives, including scholarships, fellowships, the creation of dormitories for females, and other programs, with the goal of promoting women's higher education. It should be noted that distinct fellowships and scholarships designated just for women were announced in addition to the Merit Scholarships and Scholarships/Fellowships for Backward Castes. Research indicates that measures implemented by the government might facilitate female students' access to higher education, career prospects, scholarships, and allowances.

### **10. Conclusion**

The above discourse reveals that our society's gender perspective has always been quite conservative. In our male-dominated culture, the guy has all the authority. Therefore, it is important to examine each of these issues. Women's issues may be resolved by giving them a voice in planning and decision-making processes, as well as a portion of the authority to make choices in higher education, politics, and the economy. A strong weapon for advancing gender parity is higher education, which may also serve to improve nutrition and health, lessen poverty, unemployment, and inequality, and advance human development.

Girls from rural regions seem to dedicate the least amount of time to learning and have the lowest rates of enrolment in higher education, making them a group of particular concern. Gender will be the main element examined in this study as the quality of learning opportunities accessible to females may differ fundamentally from those available to boys. The impact of 10 sets of variables that are assumed to affect both boys' and girls' educational results will also be examined in this research. These variables include poverty, parental goals and attitudes, institutional norms and regulations, a lack of decision-making processes, a lack of cultural engagement, social inequity, emotional barriers, and gender bias in the curriculum. As a result,

the elite groups and the government's extensive networking and cooperation are facilitating the adoption of an independent role in society and a gender-sensitive conversation about sustainability.

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