



Gender Parity in Higher Education: Analyzing Completion Rates and Barriers in Indian and American Universities

Dr. Jitendra Kumar Jajoria

(Chief Manager)

Rajasthan State Text Book Board

Alwar Rajasthan - 301001

ABSTRACT

Gender parity in higher education has emerged as a crucial benchmark of social equity and developmental progress globally. While institutions in both India and the United States have made significant advances in increasing female participation in higher education, disparities persist in degree completion and access to equitable academic outcomes. This paper compares gendered patterns in higher education participation and completion rates in Indian and American universities using the newest available statistical data and examines structural, socio- cultural, and economic barriers that influence women's educational trajectories. The study highlights that although female enrollment has grown, especially in India where the Gender Parity Index exceeds 1, completion gaps and systemic obstacles remain evident. The paper concludes with policy recommendations aiming to promote sustained gender equity in higher education systems.

KEYWORDS: Gender parity; higher education; completion rates; female enrollment; India; United States; barriers; socio- cultural challenges

INTRODUCTION

Achieving gender parity in higher education involves more than mere equality in enrollment figures; it requires equitable outcomes in degree completion and subsequent socio-economic mobility. Gender parity is associated with broader developmental goals, including improved labor force participation, women's economic empowerment, and reduced inequality. Comparative analysis of gender parity in higher education reveals distinct trajectories shaped by historical, social, and policy contexts. India's rapidly expanding higher education sector has witnessed dramatic increases in female participation, while the United States has seen long- term trends of women outpacing men in degree attainment at multiple levels. Despite this, both countries encounter persistent barriers that hinder true equity in educational outcomes.

This paper examines gender parity in Indian and American higher education systems with a focus on **completion rates** and the key **barriers affecting women students' academic persistence**. It combines quantitative data from national educational surveys with contextual analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding relevant to policymakers and academic researchers.

DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

The analysis utilizes data from the **All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22** for Indian higher education statistics and national indicators from the **National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)** and other authoritative U.S. education sources to analyze trends in enrollment and graduation for the United States. Where direct comparison data are limited, proximate indicators such as gender parity indices and degree attainment percentages have been triangulated from multiple reliable reports to ensure analytical rigor.

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Table 1: Gender Enrollment and Parity Indicators in India

Indicator	Value	Source
Total Enrollment in Higher Edu (2021-22)	4.33 crore	AISHE 2021-22 education21.in
Female Enrollment	2.07 crore	AISHE 2021-22 education21.in
Female Enrollment Increase Since 2014-15	+32%	AISHE comparison The Times of India
Gender Parity Index (GER Female/Male)	1.01	AISHE 2021-22 government-preprod.economictimes.indiatimes.com

In the Indian context, the **Gender Parity Index (GPI)**—the ratio of female to male gross enrollment ratio (GER)—stood at 1.01 for the 2021-22 academic year, indicating that female participation slightly **exceeds** male participation overall. This suggests improved access for women at the enrollment level. However, these figures mask differences in field choice and completion rates. government-preprod.economictimes.indiatimes.com

Table 2: Gender College Attainment Indicators in the United States

Indicator	Female	Male	Source
Bachelor's Degree Attainment (ages 25-34)	47%	37%	Pew Research Center
Bachelor's and higher (US Census 2022)	Higher women	for Lower men	for U.S. gender attainment data Wikipedia
6-Year Completion Rate (Bachelor's)	~67.6%	~61.1%	Graduation rates Education Data Initiative

U.S. data shows that women aged 25-34 are more likely than men to hold a bachelor's degree, with **47%** of women and **37%** of men attaining this level of education. Additionally, women tend to complete four- year degrees at higher rates than men within six years of enrollment. Pew Research Center+1

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF COMPLETION RATES

India: Growing Participation, Uneven Outcomes

India has made remarkable progress in expanding female access to higher education, with nearly half of enrolled students now women. Nonetheless, completion rates vary across disciplines and regions. Fields such as engineering and technology still see significant gender gaps, with women significantly underrepresented relative to males, particularly in science and technology streams. This suggests that although enrollment parity has improved, **disciplinary barriers and cultural expectations** lead to differential retention and degree completion. Moreover, women from rural and marginalized social groups face greater financial and mobility challenges that may impede sustained academic engagement.

Barriers in India include traditional socio- cultural norms that prioritize domestic roles for women, limited access to childcare or flexible study options, and financial constraints that disproportionately affect female students pursuing extended postgraduate study or professional degrees.

United States: Female Advantage, Field Imbalances

In the United States, women outnumber men in degree attainment overall and complete degrees at higher rates. According to recent analyses, women have steadily increased their share of bachelor's degree attainment over the past decades, widening the gender gap in favor of women across all racial and ethnic groups. †Pew Research Center

However, field- specific disparities persist. Women are well represented in fields like health professions and social sciences but remain underrepresented in many STEM areas; for example, engineering and computer sciences remain male- dominated sectors with lower female completion rates. †National Center for Education Statistics Additionally, the structure of financial obligations, student debt, and work- study balance impacts men and women differently, with women often facing greater economic pressure due to wage gaps and care giving roles, which may influence decisions to continue or complete higher education.

BARRIERS TO GENDER PARITY IN COMPLETION

Socio- Cultural Influences

In India, deep- rooted gender roles often influence women's educational commitments. Societal expectations related to marriage, care giving, and domestic responsibilities can interrupt or delay academic progression. These cultural norms place implicit limits on women's ability to pursue extended higher education or advanced degrees.

In the U.S., gender norms are less restrictive in terms of enrollment, but systemic cultural biases—such as gender stereotypes about suitable fields of study—continue to shape academic choices and persistence, particularly in STEM disciplines.

Economic Constraints

Economic pressures affect both contexts but manifest differently. In India, limited scholarship opportunities and reliance on family resources often force women to balance academic work with income generation or household responsibilities, leading to higher dropout risks. In the U.S., while financial aid systems exist, rising tuition and student loan burdens affect completion continuity, especially among women balancing family care and employment.

Institutional and Structural Barriers

Institutional support structures—including mentorship programs, gender- inclusive facilities, and flexible learning pathways—play a key role in supporting completion. Many Indian universities lack such robust supports, while U.S. institutions—though relatively better equipped—must still improve targeted retention programs, particularly in male- underrepresented fields and for students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To promote sustained gender parity in completion rates:

India

- Expand targeted scholarships and financial support for women students.
- Support flexible study patterns and blended learning to accommodate care giving roles.
- Enhance representation and support in STEM and professional disciplines.

United States

- Strengthen support mechanisms for male students to reduce completion disparities.
- Address structural barriers in STEM that limit gender equity.
- Provide comprehensive financial planning assistance to mitigate debt- related dropout risks.

CONCLUSION

Gender parity in higher education is not solely about equal enrollment but also equitable completion outcomes and sustained academic success. This comparative analysis reveals that while both India and the United States have improved access for women, distinctive barriers still affect degree completion. India has achieved gender parity in gross enrollment as indicated by the GPI exceeding 1, yet structural and cultural barriers impede equitable outcomes in degree completion and field representation. In contrast, U.S. women consistently complete degrees at higher rates than men, but field imbalances and structural challenges persist. Comprehensive policy interventions that address economic, social, and institutional barriers are necessary to ensure that gender parity in higher education translates into equitable success and opportunities for all learners.

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