

Empowering Women Through Higher Education: Pathways To Progress¹

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Abstract

This research explores the transformative power of higher education in empowering women and advancing gender equality. It highlights how equitable access to universities and colleges serves as a critical pathway for women's social, economic, and political empowerment. The study demonstrates that higher education not only dismantles traditional gender barriers but also equips women with critical thinking skills, knowledge, and confidence needed to assume leadership roles across various sectors, including politics, business, and the arts. Universities play a pivotal role by fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments that encourage women's participation in male-dominated fields. Despite notable progress, the research acknowledges persistent challenges such as gender discrimination, limited resources, entrenched cultural norms, and systemic biases that hinder women's educational attainment. It calls for comprehensive policy reforms and collaborative efforts to address these obstacles and ensure equal opportunities in higher education. Furthermore, the study underscores that empowering women through education benefits families and communities by enhancing well-being, reducing gender-based violence, and boosting political engagement. Ultimately, the research concludes that fostering women's strength and independence through higher education is both an ethical imperative and a strategic investment for a more just and equitable society.

Keywords: *Education; Women; Empowerment; Gender; Higher Education*

1. Introduction

It is generally accepted that education is necessary for the well-being of all individuals and that it has the potential to bring about positive changes in the world. In the framework of women's empowerment, education plays a particularly significant role at the highest level. Not only does it broaden one's intellectual horizons, but it also assists one in being more self-sufficient, self-assured, and capable of choosing decisions that are sensible. It is possible for education to question and destroy norms that have for a long time restricted the participation of women in many aspects of society. This is especially true in cultures where gender inequality is prominent.

Education of women to enable them to take control of their own lives is a cornerstone of inclusive development. Women are able to participate in political processes, have more economic opportunities, improve the health of their families, and make major contributions to the development of both their communities and the country as a whole as a consequence of this progress. Higher education provides women with enhanced knowledge, professional talents, and leadership training, which enables them to overcome difficulties in historically male-dominated fields. One illustration of this is the ability of women to triumph over obstacles in previously male-dominated fields.

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Women continue to confront a number of challenges on their way to obtaining a higher education, despite the fact that they have achieved some success. These challenges include, but are not limited to, gender-based violence, institutional biases, as well as financial and social limits. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to investigate the many ways in which education empowers women, the role that universities play in this regard, and the strategies that are necessary to overcome the challenges that are now being faced.

2. Objectives

- i. To examine how education, particularly higher education, empowers women socially, economically, and politically.
- ii. To identify hurdles to women's education and provide solutions to promote inclusive education.

3. Methodology

The research methodology used in this study is qualitative and analytical, with a significant emphasis placed on doing a literature review of prior works on the subject of women's education and empowerment, in addition to policy papers and academic publications. Articles published in journals, reports produced by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the government, case studies, and legislation frameworks that are relevant are all possible sources of this knowledge. In addition, the paper makes use of theme analysis in order to discover insights and patterns that are associated with the ways in which education has altered the lives of women and the structural challenges that they continue to face. In order to provide support for the research, we make use of statistical references and global indexes wherever they are applicable.

3.1 Status of Women: An Overview

The constitutional and legislative laws of India provide women the unique position of equality with males. This is a status that has never been accorded to women before. But these positions are the product of a lengthy path that Indian women have traversed in order to get at them. Therefore, women have historically depended on males to provide for their financial needs. This is due to the inherent gender imbalance. It was expected of women that they would keep their voices down while they were in the presence of their elders. She was the one who bore the brunt of the family's errors. At the various social occasions that she attends, she is not permitted to interact with other people. While she does have a role in the economics, social life, and politics of the society, her influence is not very significant. Up to this point, the National Movement has offered a model for the elimination of restrictions of this kind. There were social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar who placed a high priority on the education of girls and women, as well as the elimination of customs like as polygamy and child marriage. Following the country's attainment of independence, the authors of the Constitution and other national leaders in India recognized the equality of women and men respectively. Over the course of the twentieth century, several countries across the world saw a significant improvement in the status and position of women. The position of women has undergone a substantial transformation. She is responsible for a great number of reforms, some of which include the freedom to vote, the opportunity to own property, equality in marriage and employment, and other civic rights. From the beginning of our culture and our lineage, women have always been an integral part of the conventional definition of the nuclear family.

The contributions that women make to the growth and development of their nation are of critical importance in the modern day. The words of Swami Vivekananda, which were said in 1983, were as follows: "women have many and grave problems, but none that cannot be solved by that magic word education." Before moving on to analyze the role that education plays in empowering women, it is important to first investigate the positions that women play in society, including those of goddesses, mothers, sisters, wives, and in the profession of prostitutes. Since the beginning of time, there has been a divide between men and women. Within the context of this patriarchal society, the education of women has been ignored for a considerable amount of previous time. When women do not get an education that is sufficient, it may have a detrimental influence on the well-being and level of living of their offspring or children. To

achieve our goal of economically empowering women, we must first work to alleviate poverty and then make chances for microcredit available.

In addition to this, we need to promote women's access to finance for both consumption and production, as well as women's roles in the economy, globalization, agriculture, and industrial support services. If we want to achieve social empowerment of women, we need to make education, health and sanitation, nutrition, housing and shelter, a good environment, science and technology, and the protection of the rights of female children our top priorities. If we want to achieve all of these, we need to be encouraging their participation in the media. In a manner that is respectful of the intrinsic value that women and girls possess as human beings, it will demonstrate this message. They will make it a priority to eliminate damaging preconceptions about women and any and all kinds of violence that are committed against them as part of their policy. At every level, the business sector and media networks will collaborate in order to achieve gender parity in access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) and other disciplines.

Establishing professional guidelines, codes of conduct, and other forms of self-regulation is something that the media need to do in order to eradicate gender stereotypes and encourage more equal portrayals of men and women. Many shifts have occurred in the lives of women in modern Indian society, notably in Kerala in comparison to other states such as Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and so on. Kerala has been particularly affected by these developments. In every community, women are the most important members, and it is our common duty to provide them with the information and resources they need to take charge of their own lives and choose their own destinies. Every individual is required to acknowledge their position within the family, the community, and the nation. They must not be regarded as if they are of a lesser social status than the rest of the population.

3.2 Constitutional Provisions Supporting Women's Education

Within the framework of the Indian Constitution, the protection and progress of women and children get a significant amount of emphasis. Among other prohibitions, it protects youngsters from being exploited and abused, and it assures equality and prohibits discrimination based on gender, creed, and caste. Additionally, it prohibits violence against children. Within the context of democracy, laws, development policies, strategies, and programs have been established with the intention of fostering the holistic development of children by providing them with opportunities. The following are important sections of the constitution that pertain to the rights of girls:

- Article 14 - equal rights and opportunities to men and women.
- Article 15 - prohibits discrimination on any ground
- Article 23 - forced labour are prohibited.
- Article 24 -No child below the age of 15 years shall be employed to work
- Article 42 -provisions for just and human conditions of work and maternity relief
- Article 45 - Free and compulsory education for all children
- Article 47 - raising the level of nutrition and the standard of living
- Article 73 & 74 - participation of women in the political and grass root development process

According to our constitution, the following are some of the numerous safeguards that are provided to the young women of our country. It is retention that is the key concern. Despite the fact that enrolling female students is not uncommon, it is much more difficult to maintain their interest during the whole procedure.

3.3 Barriers to Women's Education

Girls have a more difficult time obtaining an education due to a variety of issues, including cultural conventions and the desires of their families. Many people are of the opinion that it is meaningless to make investments in daughters since it is expected of them to remain at home and take care of their family. On the other hand, their son would be in charge of managing their families. The majority of rural families have a sense of accomplishment and contentment with themselves when they encourage their daughters to attend school and educate them to read, write, and add. The following is a list of some of the most major challenges: The shortcomings of the classroom, the conduct of the students, the values of the parents, Conventional principles of both religion and society, Funding issues, poor school infrastructure, a shortage of trained female instructors, and overall economic hardship are all factors that contribute to the problem. A biased curriculum based on gender, poor administrative control and monitoring, insufficient teacher competency, and a lack of basic teaching facilities are all issues that affect education. Distribution of pardahs A low rate of employee retention and a high percentage of employee turnover, as well as doing domestic responsibilities, etc. According to a study conducted by the United States Department of Commerce in 1998, the primary barriers to female education in India include inadequate school infrastructure, which includes sanitary facilities; a dearth of female teachers; gender bias in courses; and conventional cultural values.

3.4 Strategies to Promote Women's Education

Without a shadow of a doubt, there is an immediate need for the formulation of a plan that would give girls' education in schools a higher priority. A curriculum that places a higher emphasis on the education of females is necessary in order to realize the goal of universal primary education. When it comes to reading rates in elementary school, the most current national program on education for girls (NPEGL) is not sufficient to complete the task of closing the gender gap. As a consequence of the effects of industrialization as well as changes in society and culture, women are confronted with a number of difficulties. The significance of investing in girls' education was pounded home by commission after commission, and the focus of these commissions was directed on parents via a variety of initiative programs designed to motivate them.

Our knowledge ought to include the following pieces of information: In order to realize the goal of Universal Elementary Education (UEE), it is necessary to educate not only boys but also all females besides boys. It is necessary for there to be a change in the gender norms for women. Obtaining economic progress and successfully completing a number of tasks in life is something that is vital for both girls and boys. Girls need to be given priority in education. In light of this, the political success of democracies is contingent upon the level of education that women get. should fulfill their constitutional obligation to provide an emphasis on the education of girls with priority. Several laws that protect the rights of girls are included in the constitution of the United States. For the sake of both social and economic progress, education for women is very necessary. For the purpose of achieving education for women, several items are necessary. The use of constitutional, political, and cultural protections is one method that may be utilized to reach this goal.

3.5 The Role of Education in Women's Empowerment

It was emphasized in the 1993 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (ICDAW) that one of the most essential methods to empower women is to provide them with the knowledge, skills, and self-confidence they need in order to participate actively in the process of development. When women get an education, society as a whole reaps the advantages. When compared to the education of males, it has a far more significant impact on both development and poverty. In addition to this, it has a significant role in reducing the risk of infant mortality and improving the overall health of children. The load that educated women carry is significant. Women play a crucial part in shaping the characteristics and perspectives of the next generation, which is why they are so important. She bears the majority of the duty for fostering the next generation of leaders and providing them with the care and guidance they need. It is more probable that women who have completed higher levels of education will be cautious when it comes to the health of their children and will be aware of how to get the necessary medical treatment for their children. Through education, they may acquire knowledge of their rights and build a sense of self-

assurance. When it comes to their children's academic accomplishments, parents who have completed higher levels of education often give them considerable attention. It is more likely that the influence of a mother's education on the lives of her children will be stronger than that of a father's education. They are able to stand shoulder to shoulder with men when they have acquired the level of empowerment that they have. Therefore, girls are not in any way inferior to men since they are completely capable of doing all of the duties that men do, and in many cases, they are even better at them.

3.6 Transformative Power of Higher Education

More and more women are going to college, which means they're challenging gender norms and making important contributions to society, politics, and the economy. This change exemplifies how education can promote gender equality and alter communities in profound ways.

3.6.1 Dismantling Traditional Gender Roles:

Economic Empowerment: Women may unlock a world of employment possibilities with the information and skills they get from access to higher education. To combat gender bias and close the wage gap, more and more women are venturing into male-dominated industries. Women are less likely to be financially dependent on male relatives or spouses when they have higher levels of education.

Social Empowerment: With the critical thinking and self-assurance fostered by higher education, women are more equipped to stand up for themselves in a variety of social situations. Education increases the likelihood that women will make well-informed choices about their health, family planning, and general welfare. With the right kind of education, women can take center stage in their communities and serve as examples for the next generation.

Political Empowerment: - Educated women are more likely to engage in civic and political activities, promoting gender-inclusive policies and legislation. - They occupy leadership roles in government, advocating for women's rights and representation in decisionmaking bodies. Public speaking, investigation, and analytical thinking are just a few of the political involvement abilities that may be cultivated via formal education.

Women's higher education access has risen in recent decades, making it a potent weapon for social, economic, and political change. It empowers women to overcome historical barriers and biases, breaking gender roles. Gender equality and a more equitable and inclusive society benefit from women in higher education. The revolutionary potential of higher education shows the individual and societal benefits of abolishing gender barriers. It leads to a society where women's thoughts and efforts are valued.

3.6.2 Challenges Women Encounter in Pursuing Higher Education

Despite the fact that there has been significant advancement in this field over the course of the last few decades, although, women all over the world continue to face immense barriers and hurdles when they are attempting to enroll in and complete their college education. Policies and initiatives that promote gender equality in education need to be enacted in order to overcome the ongoing obstacles, which include discrimination based on gender, constraints on financial resources, and societal expectations.

Gender-Based Discrimination:

1. Unequal Treatment: - Discrimination against women is common in academic contexts, including sexist admissions policies and teachers' lowered expectations. The educational experiences of women may be impacted by gender prejudice and stereotypes when it comes to the distribution of resources, opportunity, and mentoring.

2. Harassment and Violence: Campus climates characterized by violence and harassment against women discourage women from getting degrees. - As a result, fewer women may participate in school activities, which in turn reduces their access to and success in school.

Financial Constraints:

1. Affordability: - Many women are unable to enroll in or finish college due to the high total cost of attendance, which includes tuition, fees, and living costs. Due to financial constraints, many women in our nation have to choose between advancing their careers or taking care of the male children in the family. Student loan debt has a disproportionate effect on women and might threaten their financial security in the long run.

2. Lack of Financial Support: Women may face barriers to higher education access due to a lack of adequate financial assistance and scholarships that are tailored to their needs. - Women, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, may find it more difficult to shoulder the financial burden of higher education.

Societal Expectations:

1. Gender Roles and Stereotypes: - Women are less likely to pursue higher education and professional goals because societal norms value their traditional responsibilities as homemakers and caretakers more highly. - Women are less likely to have options when it comes to their education and employment due to traditional gender norms.

2. Cultural and Family Pressures: - There is a lot of pressure on women to put marriage and family first, rather than their education, due to cultural standards and family expectations. - Communities often reject and exclude women who question these standards.

Policies and Initiatives:

1. Gender-Inclusive Policies: - To ensure that all students may study in an atmosphere free from violence, harassment, and discrimination, it is essential that school regulations prohibiting these behaviors be strictly enforced.

2. Financial Aid and Scholarships: - Scholarships and other forms of financial assistance should be made available to women by various institutions, including governments, in order to help them attend college.

3. Awareness and Advocacy: - Cultural norms may be changed via lobbying initiatives that focus on women's education and challenge social expectations.

4. Mentorship and Support: - With the assistance of mentorship programs and other networks, women may overcome the obstacles they encounter when pursuing higher education.

There has been a lot of success, but women still face huge obstacles when trying to get into and through college. Changes in legislation, funding, awareness campaigns, and mentoring programs are all necessary to overcome these obstacles. In addition to promoting gender equality and social advancement, guaranteeing equitable access to higher education is a way to empower individuals. It is an investment in a better and more equal future for everyone if we break down these obstacles; it is also a moral necessity.

3.7 Higher Education Institutions' Role in Advancing Women's Empowerment

Higher education institutions play a crucial part in the advancement of women's empowerment because they provide invaluable opportunities for the development of skills, the cultivation of critical thinking, and the training of leadership skills. Higher education institutions provide a broad range of programs and classes that equip women with the knowledge and abilities they need to be successful in a number of professions. Various programs and courses challenge gender norms and encourage inclusiveness via the use of various media. By promoting women's access to specialized

training, these organizations assist women in joining males in the workforce and gaining employment opportunities. After graduating from a bachelor's degree program that places an emphasis on critical thinking and problem-solving, women are better prepared to investigate societal issues from a gender-sensitive point of view. Women are equipped with the resources necessary to combat bias based on gender, refute stereotypes, and promote gender equality when they get a degree from an accredited college or university.

Leadership Training:

1. Cultivating Women Leaders: - Leadership development programs at universities encourage and prepare women for positions of responsibility in government, industry, and society at large. These programs help women develop the skills necessary to become influential leaders and agents of change, including the ability to communicate effectively, negotiate a fair deal, and make sound decisions.

2. Encouraging Representation: - It is believed that education may pave the way for women to assume leadership roles in society at large and in educational institutions specifically. A Everyone benefits when more women hold positions of power because it increases diversity of thought and decision-making.

Creating Inclusive and Safe Environments:

1. Combating Gender Discrimination: - Institutions of higher learning must ensure their campuses are welcoming places for all students, without bias or harassment based on gender. Ensuring that women may pursue their education without fear or hindrance is achieved via the implementation of strong rules and the provision of support networks.

2. Encouraging Diversity in Fields of Study: - Women are more likely to pursue careers in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) areas when educational opportunities are more diverse. Because it brings new ideas and viewpoints to the table, diversity like this questions long-held gender stereotypes and encourages creativity.

When it comes to advancing gender equality, universities and colleges play a significant role because of this reason. Through the provision of centers for skill development, critical thinking, and leadership training, they assist women in becoming powerful advocates for gender equality and professionals in a range of disciplines. In order to eliminate the barriers that have traditionally inhibited the growth of women, these institutions have created learning environments that are inviting and safe for their students. The increasing number of women who are enrolling in college and majoring in a wide variety of fields is not only beneficial for them on a personal level, but it will also contribute to the elimination of barriers between the sexes and the development of a society that is more equitable and welcoming to everyone.

3.8 Long-Term Societal Benefits of Women's Empowerment Through Education

It is a significant catalyst for personal and social change that women have access to higher education; it enhances political representation, diminishes gender-based violence, and promotes employment involvement, among other positive results. In doing so, it emphasizes how important it is to establish a school environment that promotes the empowerment of women and propels communities toward greater gender parity.

Increased Workforce Participation: Higher education empowers women, as is shown in the huge increase in female labor force participation. Women with higher education have higher employment, economic development, and financial independence. This makes women feel financially secure at home and reduces their dependence on males.

Reduced Gender-Based Violence: This program gives women the knowledge, skills, and confidence to protect themselves against gender-based violence. When women know their rights and fight abuse, domestic and other gender-based violence decreases. Economic freedom empowers women to escape violent relationships and seek treatment.

Enhanced Political Representation: More politically active and civically involved women hold bachelor's degrees. They participate more in politics, including decision-making and campaigning for office. Ending gender inequality, advancing women's rights, and increasing women in politics creates a more inclusive and egalitarian society.

Breaking Stereotypes and Challenging Norms: It questions preconceived notions about men and women. It encourages introspection and gives women the tools they need to question the status quo that keeps them at a disadvantage. Communities undergo transformation as a result of the domino effect that educated women cause when they overcome obstacles.

Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction: Greater economic development and poverty reduction are seen in societies where a larger proportion of educated women live. Society benefits from the use of educated women's abilities and skills, which increases production, fosters innovation, and contributes to general prosperity.

Improved Health and Well-being: When it comes to their own and their families' health, educated women are more likely to make well-informed judgments. Both their own and their children's health are better off because of the increased accessibility to healthcare resources. In the long run, this is good for society's health and welfare.

Long-term, investing in women's education may benefit society. It increases employment, reduces violence against women, and improves political representation. If we want gender parity and a more fair and inclusive society, we must invest in an educational system that empowers women. Women's successes help society and advance gender equality.

4. Conclusion

Empowering women through education is essential to achieving gender equality and building inclusive, sustainable societies. Education equips women with the confidence, skills, and knowledge needed to challenge gender stereotypes and actively participate across all areas of society and governance. While significant barriers such as discriminatory attitudes, funding shortages, and systemic biases remain, targeted policies and supportive learning environments can enhance women's access to and success in higher education. Investing in women's education is not only a catalyst for individual empowerment but also yields far-reaching benefits for families, communities, and entire nations. Prioritizing this investment is a crucial step toward fostering a more equitable, prosperous future for all.

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