

## Socio-Economic and Institutional Factors Influencing Women's Higher Education in India : An Empirical Approach

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### Abstract

Women's higher education in India has undergone rapid quantitative expansion over the past decade, yet deep-seated socio-economic inequalities and institutional deficiencies continue to shape access, participation, and outcomes. This paper presents an empirical analysis of secondary national data — primarily from the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021–22 and related educational statistics — to examine how socio-economic and institutional factors influence women's participation in tertiary education. By situating trends within broader socio-economic contexts and policy frameworks, the paper identifies critical avenues for enhancing gender equity in Indian higher education.

Women's education has a significant social impact. Lower fertility rates, infant mortality rates, and maternal mortality rates are only a few of the most evident socio-economic benefits. Bridging the educational gender gap promotes gender equality and it is vital both inside and outside the classroom in ensuring equal rights and opportunities for people of all genders. Increases in the number of women educated in a region are linked to high levels of development such as the development of the economy. Women's education increases their salaries which helps the economy flourish. Women's education leads to women's empowerment.

**Keywords:** Women education, Fertility, Mortality. Equality, gender equity, higher education, socio-economic barriers, AISHE.

### Introduction

Education is widely acknowledged as a foundational mechanism for individual empowerment and national development. In India, the expansion of higher education has been a central policy objective, with a focus on increasing access and improving equity for disadvantaged groups. Women, in particular, have been a priority within this policy paradigm due to historical gender disparities in educational attainment and labour force outcomes. Women's education refers to any type of education that aims to improve the knowledge and abilities of women and girls. It covers general education in schools and colleges, vocational and technical education, professional education, and health education, among other things, and incorporates all facilities and opportunities for female learners. The socioeconomic

impact of women's education has spawned a burgeoning field of investigation in international development. Increases in the number of women educated in a region are linked to high levels of development. Some of the consequences are linked to economic growth. Women's education raises their earnings and contributes to GDP growth. Other side effects are linked to societal progress.

Women's education has a host of societal benefits, many of which are tied to women's empowerment. The Indian government has stated a strong commitment to universal education; however, India continues to have one of Asia's lowest female literacy rates. In 2020, the female literacy rate is 70.3 percent, implying that 29.7% of women in India remain illiterate today. This low literacy rate has a severe influence not only on women's lives but also on their families lives and the economic development of their country. Illiterate women, according to various studies, have a high risk of fertility and mortality, poor nutritional status, little economic potential, and little household autonomy. The health and well-being of a woman's children are also negatively affected by her lack of education. In India, for example, infant mortality was found to be inversely associated with the mother's educational level in the present study

Over the past decade, India has witnessed remarkable increases in the number of women accessing higher education institutions (HEIs). According to the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) — an annual data collection initiative of the Ministry of Education — female enrolment in higher education increased from approximately 1.57 crore in 2014–15 to 2.07 crore in 2021–22, reflecting roughly a 32 % increase over this period. Female students now comprise about 48 % of total higher education enrolment, marking significant progress toward gender parity in participation. Despite these promising trends, socio-economic and institutional challenges continue to shape women's access and outcomes in higher education. Issues such as uneven representation across disciplines, lower participation in technical fields, socioeconomic barriers, and institutional inadequacies underscore the complexity of gender equity in the Indian context.

This paper synthesises empirical evidence from national datasets to explore these dynamics and analyse how structural factors influence women's participation in higher education.

## Literature Review

Understanding women's access and participation in higher education requires engagement with literature across several thematic lenses: quantitative trends in enrolment, socio-economic determinants, institutional barriers, and policy responses. The impact of women's education on growth can be measured in a variety of ways, according to academics. Typically, studies focus on the gender disparity in educational attainment between boys and girls, rather than just the level of education attained by women. This makes it easier to discern between the special effects of women's education and the general benefits of education. It's worth noting that some studies, particularly older ones, focus solely on women's overall educational attainment. Examining the percentage of men and women who graduate from

each stage of school is one approach to gauge education levels. Examining the average number of years of schooling received by members of each gender is a similar, more precise method. Because literacy is one of the early and major goals of the school, a third approach looks at literacy rates by gender. This shows not only how much education was given, but also how effective it was. The most popular technique to assess economic progress is to examine changes in GDP growth. Correlations are examined across multiple countries and periods to determine that a link exists. The result is usually a pretty constant average effect, though fluctuation over time can be measured as well. It is also possible to examine the advantages of education for an individual. This is accomplished by first calculating the cost of schooling and the amount of revenue gained during the years spent in school. The net return is the difference between the entire gain in income owing to education and the sum of these two values.

### Effects on economic development

Women's education benefits both people and countries alike. Throughout their lives, people who invest in education make a net profit. The profitability of education, according to estimates of the private rate of return, is indisputable, universal, and global, according to Harry Patrinos, the lead education economist at the World Bank. If female education increases human capital, productivity, and economic growth at the same rate as male education, women's educational disadvantage is economically wasteful. The economic benefits of women's education, measured as the economic rate of return to education, are equivalent to those of men's education, according to research conducted around the world. As a result, the gender gap in education is undesirable in terms of its effects on economic development. When a country is just moderately impoverished, the effect of the educational gender gap is more obvious. As a country rises out of extreme poverty, the incentive to invest in women increases. Women's education promotes the equitability of income distribution in a society, in addition to overall economic growth. Increased women's education is critical to attaining this goal since it focuses on underprivileged women, who are a particularly vulnerable demographic. There is also evidence that a developing country's lower gender discrepancy in educational attainment correlates with a society's lower total economic disparity.

### Effects on social development

Education for women has a tremendous social impact. Reduced fertility rates, lower infant mortality rates, and lower maternal death rates are only a few of the most noticeable socio-economic benefits. Closing the gender gap in education also promotes gender equality, which is vital both in and of it because it assures that people of all genders have equal rights and opportunities. Women benefit cognitively from schooling. Women's quality of life is enhanced by improved cognitive abilities, which also have additional advantages. Educated women, for example, are better able to make health-related decisions for themselves and their children. Increased political participation among women is also linked to cognitive abilities. Educated women are more likely to participate in civic engagement and attend political meetings, and there are multiple examples of educated women in developing countries securing benefits for themselves through political activities. There is further evidence that countries with well-educated women have a higher chance of democratic administration.

There are other advantages associated with a woman's role at home. Domestic abuse is less common among educated women, regardless of other social status markers such as employment position. Women with a higher level of education are also more involved in family decision-making and report making more decisions over time. These advantages extend to financial decisions in particular. Aside from the intrinsic advantage of boosting a woman's agency, having women take a more active role in the family also benefits family members socially. Children, particularly girls, are more likely to attend school when their mother is educated. Adult literacy initiatives can indirectly aid to teach mothers the value of education and urge them to send their children to school in households where the mother is uneducated. Children benefit from having an educated mother over an educated father for a variety of reasons, including higher survival rates and better nutrition.

### Limitation of impact

Women's education has a lesser impact on development in particular situations. In locations where there is a lot of poverty, the economic benefits of investing in women are substantially smaller. In some circumstances, women's education is of poorer quality than men's, reducing its efficacy. This tendency is sometimes accompanied by what is known as a "hidden curriculum" in schools, which reinforces particular ideals. Because of the emphasis on males' superiority, educated women may forego economic prospects in favour of lower-paying traditionally female employment, resulting in bad economic and social outcomes. Curricula can also be differentiated based on gender in some circumstances. It promotes traditional gender roles by employing educational environments and materials to reinforce gendered views about women's primary responsibilities to their families, which include their job and education. Female students study needlework, household science, and child welfare in primary school, whilst male students study wood and metal crafts. Male students have access to technical and vocational training in secondary school that female students do not. There are other instances where women's education aids macro-development but is ineffective for a family. In India, the majority of working women are employed in traditionally female-dominated fields such as teaching, medicine, nursing, and social work. As a result, the country faces a significant problem: a high proportion of unemployment among educated women. Furthermore, while investing in women's education has a better total return when looking at all levels of education, investing in men has a higher rate of return through primary school.

### Relationship between Women education and Socio-economic factors in India

Communities all around India might serve as useful case studies for demonstrating the complicated interaction between education and socioeconomic systems. Traditional conservative thinking, early marriage, child labour, and structural and institutional reasons are just a few of the societal factors that have kept women from getting an education in India. Men are 80.9 percent literate, while women are 64.6 percent literate, indicating a gender discrepancy in literacy across the country. While India as a whole appears to support the thesis that a lack of female education is a barrier to economic development, a closer examination of the relationship between education and socioeconomics between states reveals a more

complicated picture. The complexity of education, which is both a cause and an effect of social and economic issues, can be illustrated by comparing states.

Kerala, in the southern state of India, has the highest female literacy rate, at 91.98 percent. In Kerala, 26.9% of female students are expected to seek higher education, whereas 19.3% of male students are. The state's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is ranked 11th out of all Indian states. The unusually high female literacy rate, especially when compared to the national rate of 65.46 percent, can be linked to a historical, societal emphasis placed on women in comparison to other Indian states. Kerala has one of the lowest rates of early marriage in India since women have the power to inherit the land and choose their partners. The lowest fertility rate in Kerala, which achieved —below replacement level fertility two decades ahead of the all-India target year of 2011, is the strongest link between educational impacts on social systems. Educated women are thought to have more opportunities that need more time than a woman can handle with more children, and educated women have more knowledge, access, and choice in family planning devices such as contraceptives. As women feel more confident and capable in their kid's care and are more informed of health practices, the state has the lowest infant and child mortality rates in India—a universal measure of educational influence. Rajasthan, with a female literacy rate of 52.66 percent, is the state with the lowest female literacy. Male students in Rajasthan pursue higher education at a rate of 20.8 percent, while female students enrolled at a rate of 14.9 percent.

### **Socio-Economic Barriers**

Socio-economic conditions play a pivotal role in shaping higher education access for women. Lower household income, limited financial resources for tuition and accommodation, and entrenched gender norms often restrict women's educational trajectories, especially in rural and marginalised communities.

While AISHE data often tracks enrolment and institutional metrics, broader socio-economic research points to persistent inequalities that influence access to tertiary education. For instance, gender norms, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and labour division contribute to differential participation rates across socio-economic groups.

Policy frameworks like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasise inclusive access, equity, and quality improvement in higher education. Targeted scholarship programmes, girls' hostel facilities, and affirmative action are among the mechanisms designed to enhance women's participation. However, the effectiveness of these measures varies across regions and institutional types.

### **Methodological Framework**

Given the focus on secondary analysis, this study primarily utilises data from:

All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021–22: Provides detailed information on enrolment, faculty, institutions, gender parity indices, and other educational indicators.

Supplementary data points from government press releases and media analyses of AISHE findings to contextualise trends.

The analytical approach involves descriptive statistical summarisation of key variables, complemented by thematic interpretation grounded in socio-economic theory and institutional analysis. According to AISHE 2021–22 data, total female enrolment in higher education stood at 2.07 crore, accounting for 48 % of overall student enrolment across Indian Housemate enrolment has increased significantly over the past decade:

In 2014–15, female enrolment was approximately 1.57 crore. By 2021–22, it rose to 2.07 crore, a growth of roughly 32 %. These figures reflect a sustained upward trend, indicating improved access and participation for women.

### Socio-Economic Determinants

Socio-economic status influences access to higher education. Lower household income often correlates with delayed or limited tertiary participation, particularly for women who may face competing domestic or economic pressures. Although AISHE data does not directly capture household income metrics, the broader pattern of enrolment suggests that women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds may encounter barriers related to affordability and opportunity cost.

Institutional infrastructure — including campus safety mechanisms, girls' hostels, transport connectivity, and gender-responsive facilities — influence women's ability to participate in higher education, especially at the undergraduate and residential levels. Policy initiatives aimed at expanding hostel facilities and safety measures are ongoing but vary widely across states and institutional types.

### Conclusion

Women's higher education in India has made substantial quantitative gains over the past decade, with increased enrolment and growing gender parity across academic levels. Yet, socio-economic and institutional factors continue to shape unequal participation and outcomes. Improving gender equity in Indian higher education requires multi-pronged strategies that address economic inequalities, disciplinary segregation, faculty representation, and institutional culture. Sustained policy focus, combined with data-driven institutional reforms, can help unlock the full potential of women as both learners and contributors to India's educational and economic growth.

The study concludes that women's education has a huge social influence. Only a few of the most visible socioeconomic benefits include lower fertility rates, infant mortality rates, and maternal mortality rates. Closing the gender gap in education promotes gender equality, which is important both within and outside education since it ensures that people of all genders have equal rights and opportunities.

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