

Women in Indian Higher Education and Constitutional Provisions

Prof. Bhaskar Deodatta Kasote

Assistant Professor

Ahmednagar College, Ahilyanagar

Abstract

The position of women in Indian higher education has improved significantly over the past few decades. Along with social, economic, and political changes, the provisions of equality, justice, and affirmative action in the Indian Constitution have promoted women's education. This research paper examines women's participation in higher education, the challenges they face, government policies, and constitutional provisions. The paper makes it clear that although the proportion of women in higher education has increased, issues such as rural-urban disparity, social constraints, and economic difficulties persist. Therefore, there is a need for more robust policies in the future.

Introduction

Education is an effective instrument of social transformation. Women's education is essential not only for individual development but also for the overall progress of the nation. Traditionally, women in India were deprived of education. However, after independence, the Indian Constitution granted the right to equality, leading to progress in women's education. Today, women's participation in higher education in India has increased. According to the AISHE report 2022–23, approximately 21.8 million women are participating in higher education, and the Gender Parity Index is more than 1, which means that the proportion of women is higher than that of men.

Structure of the Indian Higher Education System

While studying the Indian higher education system, it becomes clear that it is not only large in terms of numbers but also structurally diverse. India is counted among the major education systems in the world, as thousands of universities, millions of students, and various types of educational institutions operate here. This system includes traditional universities, engineering and medical colleges, management institutions, open universities, as well as research centres. This vast expansion of higher education is not limited to knowledge creation but is also important for economic development, social transformation, and human capital formation.

The structure of the Indian higher education system is multi-layered. It involves the central government, state governments, the private sector, and autonomous institutions. The University Grants Commission (UGC) plays a major role in regulating higher education, distributing funds, and ensuring quality control. In addition, the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) regulates technical education institutions. Through these bodies, standards of quality in education are determined, which are essential for maintaining the standard of higher education.

Historical and policy factors have also been important in the expansion of Indian higher education. After independence, the country considered education as a tool for nation-building and accordingly established many universities and institutions. In the later period, due to globalization and economic liberalization, the need for skill-based education increased, leading to the rapid expansion of professional and technical institutions. As a result, today the availability and accessibility of higher education in India have increased significantly.

In this broad education system, inclusivity has become an important element. Various policies have been implemented to ensure that education reaches all sections of society rather than being limited to certain classes. These include special measures for socially backward groups, economically weaker sections, and especially women. The government has made long-term efforts to reduce gender inequality in education. In this context, the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) is extremely important. This policy has been designed to bring comprehensive reforms to the Indian education system. NEP 2020 emphasizes the principle of “Education for All” and aims to develop an inclusive, flexible, and quality-oriented education system. Special emphasis has been placed on increasing access to higher education, improving the quality of education, and promoting research.

From the perspective of women’s education, NEP 2020 includes several important provisions. First, the concept of a “Gender Inclusion Fund” has been introduced to remove barriers to women’s education. Through this fund, efforts are made to provide necessary infrastructure, scholarships, and a safe educational environment for girls. Secondly, emphasis has been placed on providing special educational facilities for girls in rural and remote areas, so that geographical disparities in education can be reduced. Scholarships and financial assistance are extremely important measures for women’s education. Many girls are unable to pursue higher education due to financial difficulties. Therefore, the government has introduced various scholarship schemes that encourage girls to continue their education. Fee concessions and free education schemes are also implemented. These measures reduce financial barriers and increase access to education.

Institutional expansion is also an important factor. Separate colleges, hostels, and safe campuses for women have been established. This increases parental confidence and provides a conducive environment for girls to pursue education. Such facilities are especially needed in rural areas, where social and cultural constraints are stronger. In addition, increasing flexibility in higher education is another important aspect of NEP 2020. Multi-disciplinary education, credit transfer systems, and online learning facilities enable students to pursue education according to their needs. This is particularly useful for women, as they have to balance family responsibilities and education.

However, despite all this progress, some challenges remain. Social norms, gender discrimination, economic inequality, and the digital divide create barriers in women's education. Particularly in rural areas, girls' education is still not given priority. Therefore, along with policy measures, a change in social mindset is necessary. Overall, the Indian higher education system is broad, multidimensional, and continuously evolving. Policies like NEP 2020 aim to make education more inclusive, equitable, and quality-oriented. The measures taken for women's education are increasing their participation, which has a positive impact on overall social development. In the future, policy continuity, effective implementation, and social awareness will be necessary to strengthen these efforts further.

Position of Women in Higher Education

Increasing Participation

In the past decade, the increase in women's participation in higher education in India has been considered an important indicator of social and educational transformation. Around 2011–12, gender inequality in higher education was clearly visible, with a higher proportion of men than women. However, by 2019–20, this gap had significantly reduced, and in some fields, women's participation has equalled or exceeded that of men. For example, in medical education today, the proportion of girls exceeds 50% in many states. Similarly, in some central universities, women's enrolment in postgraduate courses is equal to or higher than that of men.

Several factors are responsible for this change. Government scholarship schemes and incentive-based policies have made it easier for girls to pursue education. For example, post-matric scholarships or special fee concessions for girls in engineering education have encouraged girls from rural and middle-class families to move towards higher education. Scholarships for the "Single Girl Child" have also increased enrolment. Social attitudes have also changed positively. For instance, earlier in rural areas, girls' education was often

discontinued after the 12th grade, but now many families send them to cities for undergraduate and postgraduate studies.

However, this progress is not uniform at all levels. In some remote areas, financial difficulties, safety issues, and social constraints persist. Therefore, to sustain the growth in women's participation, more effective and locally focused policies are required.

Participation across Fields

Earlier, women's participation in higher education was mainly limited to arts and commerce, but in recent times, they have made significant progress in fields such as science, technology, and management. This changing trend can be attributed to modern social perspectives, the expansion of educational opportunities, and government policies. The increasing enrolment of women in engineering is a major example. In this field, which was earlier considered male-dominated, today many technical institutions report 25–35% participation of girls. This growth has been possible due to special admission concessions and scholarships for girls in prestigious engineering colleges. In medical education, the dominance of women is clearly visible. In many medical colleges, the proportion of girls in MBBS and other courses exceeds 50%. For example, states like Maharashtra and Kerala have seen a significant increase in female enrolment. Women's presence in the research field is also increasing. In science and technology, women are actively participating in research projects, Ph.D. programs, and innovation. Overall, women's increasing participation across various fields is not just an educational change but an important indicator of social empowerment.

Economic and Social Impact

Women's higher education brings significant changes to their personal and social lives. First, education greatly increases employment opportunities for women. Educated women work across sectors—education, healthcare, administration, and industry—thereby improving their economic conditions. Second, economic independence increases women's confidence and self-respect. They can fulfil their own needs and actively participate in family financial decisions. Third, education enhances women's decision-making ability. They can make important decisions related to family, society, and career more effectively. Overall, women's higher education is not limited to individual progress but is essential for social empowerment and economic development.

Challenges in Women's Education

In India, the biggest barriers to women's education are social in nature. Due to the patriarchal system, women are still given a secondary status, which directly affects their education. In many families, priority is given to boys' education, while girls' education is considered secondary. Early marriage is also a serious issue, due to which many girls drop out before completing higher education. Similarly, traditional social roles—such as household responsibilities and family care—limit the time and opportunities available for women's education. On the other hand, economic difficulties and educational inequality are also significant challenges. The rising cost of education, especially in higher education, is unaffordable for many families, leading to the discontinuation of girls' education. In rural areas, a lack of infrastructure, technological resources, and quality institutions creates additional difficulties. The digital divide further limits women's participation in online education. During the COVID-19 period, these issues became more severe, as many girls were deprived of education due to a lack of digital resources.

Therefore, coordinated efforts at social, economic, and technological levels are necessary to address these challenges.

Constitutional Provisions for Women's Education in India

The Indian Constitution provides a strong legal foundation for women's education and empowerment. The right to equality is a fundamental component, ensuring equal treatment before the law. Article 14 guarantees equality to all citizens, while Article 15(1) prohibits discrimination based on gender. At the same time, Article 15(3) empowers the state to make special provisions for women, enabling the implementation of affirmative policies for their advancement. From these provisions, the concept of positive discrimination has developed. Under Article 15(3), measures such as reservations, scholarship schemes, and the establishment of women's colleges are implemented. These help in providing equal opportunities and increasing women's participation in education. In terms of employment and opportunities, Article 16 ensures equal opportunity, while Article 39(d) emphasizes equal pay for equal work. Directive Principles also give special attention to women's welfare. Article 39 promotes equal opportunities for men and women, while Article 42 ensures maternity protection, which is important for women's health and safety. Education falls under the concurrent list, making both the central and state governments responsible. This enables the effective implementation of policies and better promotion of women's education.

Reservation Policy and Women's Education

India's reservation system is considered crucial for achieving social justice and balanced development. Provisions have been made for Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC) to ensure opportunities in education and employment. Additionally, reservations for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) reduce financial barriers in education. Along with vertical reservation, horizontal reservation for women is implemented, providing additional opportunities across all categories. This system facilitates easier access to higher education and significantly increases women's participation. It is especially beneficial for women from socially and economically backward groups, as it helps integrate them into the mainstream education system. Thus, the reservation system is not only a mechanism for ensuring equality but also an effective tool for women's empowerment and increased participation in higher education.

Government Policies and Schemes

Various schemes and policy measures have been implemented in India to promote women's education. Scholarship schemes are particularly important as they provide financial support and encourage girls to pursue higher education. Separate scholarships and financial assistance programs for girls have made it possible for many families to afford education. At the institutional level, women's universities and hostels have been established to provide a safe and supportive educational environment. In recent times, innovative initiatives have also been introduced, such as fee concessions for girls in engineering education and special scholarships to promote their participation in STEM fields. Provisions like reservation for the "Single Girl Child" have also proven effective. As a result of these initiatives, female enrolment in higher education has increased significantly, with some states recording growth of up to 30–35%. These measures not only promote education but also contribute to women's empowerment.

Future Directions

For the holistic development of women's higher education, certain fundamental and long-term measures are essential. First, expanding educational facilities in rural areas is necessary, as there is still a lack of institutions and infrastructure. Second, the expansion of digital education is required to ensure access to online learning opportunities for all students.

Third, creating safe and inclusive campuses is crucial, as safety assurance increases parental confidence and female enrolment. Additionally, focusing on skill-based education can enhance employability and economic independence. Finally, widespread awareness regarding gender equality is necessary, as true educational equality cannot be achieved

without a change in social mindset. Coordinated implementation of these measures can lead to sustainable progress in women's higher education.

Conclusion

The position of women in Indian higher education has become significantly stronger and more influential. Constitutional provisions of equality, affirmative action, and various educational policies have expanded opportunities for women. As a result, women have not only increased their participation but have also demonstrated their capabilities across academic and professional fields. Education has positively impacted women's confidence, economic independence, and social status, contributing to the development of family, society, and the nation. However, fundamental challenges such as social norms, patriarchal mindset, economic inequality, rural-urban disparity, and digital inequality persist. Therefore, effective implementation of policies, context-based planning, and continuous evaluation are essential. Future strategies must focus on inclusivity, technology-based learning, and skill development. Expanding digital education, ensuring safe and gender-sensitive environments, and promoting social awareness are crucial. Overall, women's education is not merely a question of gender equality but a foundation for national development. An educated woman not only transforms her own life but also becomes a driving force for positive social change. Hence, prioritizing women's higher education is essential for building a progressive and balanced society.

References

1. Ministry of Education. (2023). *All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2022–23*. Government of India.
2. Government of India. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Ministry of Education.
3. The Constitution of India. (1950). Government of India.
4. Chanana, K. (2007). *Globalisation, Higher Education and Gender: Changing Subject Choices of Indian Women*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(7), 590–598.
5. Desai, S., & Kulkarni, V. (2008). *Changing Educational Inequalities in India in the Context of Affirmative Action*. *Demography*, 45(2), 245–270.
6. Agarwal, P. (2009). *Indian Higher Education: Envisioning the Future*. Sage Publications.
7. Tilak, J. B. G. (2015). *How Inclusive is Higher Education in India?* *Social Change*, 45(2), 185–223.
8. NITI Aayog. (2022). *SDG India Index Report*. Government of India.

□□□