

# Gender Issues in Higher Education

## Abstract

Higher Education is generally defined as education beyond secondary school, i.e. education provided by colleges, universities and professional institutes. It is well-known that higher education is a key to achieving economic and socio-cultural progress and human development in any country. It is also necessary that access to higher education should be available to every citizen of the country, regardless, of gender or caste. The six pillars of human development: equity, sustainability, productivity, empowerment, cooperation and security cannot be achieved in a system where only a part of the population has access to quality higher education. Hence, equal access and opportunity to all is the basic requirement for building sustainable societies. The United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966 declares, in Article 13, that "higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education". The Indian Constitution mentions 'Education' as a fundamental right and the higher education sector in India is currently the third largest in the world.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Cooperation, Constitution

## Introduction

The problem of women in higher education came to the forefront on the global eco-political scene in 1998. The World Conference on Higher Education gave special attention to the issue of women in Higher Education. The year also saw the publication of the document 'Higher Education and Women: Issues and Perspectives' (UNESCO, 1998). In India, the Kothari Commission had made recommendations in 1964-66 on equality in educational opportunities for men and women.

There has been a great increase in the number of universities and colleges and student enrollment, also of female students. The enrollment of lady students has also increased from 33, 06, 000 in 2001 to 70,49,000 in 2010-11. However, gender inequalities are still prevalent to a large extent.

Gender disparities arise due to traditional role expectations, from women, particularly, married women. As a result, there is a high drop-out rate of to-be-married or just-married women. Girls, mostly, are in a dilemma as they get into marriage and start a family. This constitutes 9% of the crowd.

In the Indian society and culture, marriage is traditionally perceived as an event of utmost importance in the life of a woman, and everything else. Work, career, education is often considered subservient. Social and family upbringing often leads to lower enrolment of women in higher education, particularly in professional courses like engineering and technology, which are traditionally looked at as the male domain.

Economic Inequalities exist to a very large extent in the country along with a high population. Large families which often cannot provide for the education of all the children, still tend to give preference to the male child when it comes to giving educational opportunities. These disparities start at the school level, with more number of girls dropping out than boys, which are socio-economic in nature.

In the rural areas, the girl child is made to perform household and agricultural chores. This is one of the many factors limiting girls' education. Cleaning the house, preparing the food, looking after their siblings, the elderly and the sick, grazing the cattle and collecting firewood are some of the key tasks they have to perform. Households are therefore reluctant to spare them for schooling.

In the urban areas, however, there is a discernible difference in the opportunities that girls get for education and employment. Though the figures for girls would still be low as compared to boys, what is heartening to see is that whenever given the opportunity, girls have excelled more than boys.

## Darshana Palwankar

Student of 2nd year LL.M,  
S.N.D.T Law School,  
Mumbai



## Subodh Saxena

Associate Professor & H.O.D.,  
Deptt. of History  
D.A.V College,  
Kanpur

Another major constraining factor preventing parents from freely sending their girls to school, is as public spaces in India continue to be relatively hostile to the presence of women, and rarely function in a way to make women feel secure and confident. Transporting girls to school and back safely, especially where secondary schools and universities are far away from their homes, is a critical policy measure that has received scant attention. Similarly, while initiatives to teach girls self defense or cycling have been widely hailed as critical components of gender-sensitive education, they have not really been taken up and promoted widely through the education system.

Achieving gender equality in higher education in India is a socio-cultural and socio-economic problem. Unfortunately, the problem often gets studied as merely an economic problem, with recommendations made about Government spending, establishment of educational institutions, and regional balance. The paradigm of Government spending on education does have economic issues to be resolved. But focus, should be on increasing the quality of education, changing the socio-cultural paradigm, which will help women take the benefit of the increased capacity and spending in the Higher Education sector.

A revolutionary change in the socio-cultural paradigm is of paramount importance, as gender inequality begins at home at a tender age. This starts with minor things like the tasks assigned to boys and girls at home, difference in the toys given to both, rituals of religious and social nature and the general overall upbringing. In this context relevant points need to be made:

1. The schools should take up the responsibility of propounding gender equality not just amongst the children, but also sensitizing the parents towards gender issues. This will work in a two-way pattern: the values of gender equality will be inculcated in the children at a very young age, so that they become enlightened and liberated citizens of tomorrow; and at the level of the parents, who will bring out their children in a more egalitarian spirit.
2. Private sector is essential to complement the Government in creating opportunities for quality education for women.
3. Economic independence is the key to social independence and young women should be encouraged to earn while they learn, and continue to do so even later.
4. However, an equitable society will only be created when people understand the importance of women's education and economic independence and do not give preferential treatment to the male child, particularly in the less developed areas and socio-economic classes.

### Conclusion

The stalwarts of the Indian freedom struggle realized the importance of education in general, and women's education in particular. Social reformers like Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Maharshi Dhondo Keshav Karve worked hard to achieve the goal of educating women in the then orthodox and highly discriminating society. He started the first women's university in the country in 1916. He worked for widows' remarriage, considered a taboo at that time and his organization worked for the shelter and education of widows as well. Maharshi Karve travelled extensively to spread the cause of women's education. He also lectured at various forums in America and England about women's education.

The independent and educated woman of today owes a lot to the revolutionary work of the social reformers of back then. It is time now for another social revolution of this kind, to drive more and more women towards higher education to remove gender inequalities in the country and creating a conducive environment, where women will be able to take confident steps towards empowerment and independence because an Enlightened Woman is a Source of Infinite Strength.

### References

1. Powar, K. B. (2002). Indian Higher Education: A Conglomerate of Concept, facts and practices, Concept Publication Company.
2. Mishra Sharda, (2006). UGC and Higher Education System in India. Book Enclare Company.
3. <http://education.nic.in/uhe/uhe.asp>, available on 25.1.2011
4. Jandhyala B.G. Tilak, Absence of Policy and Perspective in Higher Education. Economic and Political Weekly Vol. 39.
5. Gender Inequality in Higher Education in India: The Sustainability Paradox By Dr. Kalyani Bondre (Indian Federation of University Women's Associations).
6. Employment and Educational Status: Challenges of Women Empowerment in India Pankaj Kumar Baro & Rahul Sarania.