

Degrees of Freedom: Higher Education as a Catalyst of Women's Empowerment in Contemporary India

31

Chapter

Prof. Nivedita¹

¹Associate Professor, Department of Geography, Government College, Solan, Himachal Pradesh

ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the role of higher education as a structural lever for women's empowerment in contemporary India, situating recent enrolment trends and policy initiatives. Drawing on secondary data from successive rounds of the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) and a wide range of empirical and theoretical literature, the study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach to explore four interrelated dimensions: (i) growth and patterns in women's participation in higher education across levels, disciplines, and social groups; (ii) the relevance of tertiary education for women's capabilities, agency, and socio-economic mobility; (iii) persistent barriers including patriarchal norms, economic constraints, institutional deficiencies, and labour-market segmentation that constrain the empowering potential of higher education; and (iv) the implications of women's educational advancement for inclusive democracy and sustainable economic development. The review finds that while female enrolment and Gross Enrolment Ratios have risen markedly and now slightly exceed those of men, participation remains uneven by caste, region, minority status, and field of study, and translation into substantive empowerment is contingent on supportive social, economic, and institutional conditions. The paper argues that expanding women's access to high-quality, gender-sensitive higher education is both a right-based imperative and a macroeconomic necessity for India's aspirations of women-led development.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment; Higher Education; Gross Enrolment Ratio; Gender Inequality; and Human Capital

INTRODUCTION

Women constitute nearly half of India's population - approximately 48.5 percent according to the 2011 Census - but continue to lag behind men on key social and economic indicators, including health outcomes, educational attainment, labour-force participation, and access to productive assets.

Despite constitutional guarantees and seven decades of planned development, gender-based disadvantage remains deeply embedded, manifesting in practices such as sex-selective abortion, unequal nutrition and healthcare, gender-based violence, and systematic discrimination within households, labour markets, and public institutions.

If this proportion of human resources is not nurtured through timely and equitable investments in education, health, and economic opportunity, India's aspirations for accelerated and inclusive development are fundamentally compromised. Numerous studies and policy reports underscore that illiteracy, educational inequality, sexual harassment, and gender-biased mortality and morbidity are not only violations of rights but also structural impediments to human capital formation and growth. Recognising these constraints, the Government of India, the University Grants Commission (UGC), and other apex bodies have launched a range of schemes to enhance women's participation in schooling and higher education, including targeted scholarships, residential and safety infrastructure, and gender-sensitisation initiatives.

As per the 2011 Census, India's overall literacy rate stood at about 73–74 percent, with a female literacy rate around 65 percent compared to over 80 percent for males, reflecting substantial gender gaps in basic education. In the subsequent decade, administrative data show notable progress in women's access to higher education: AISHE 2021–22 and 2022–23 report that female enrolment has risen to over 2 crore, that women now constitute around 48 percent of total higher-education enrolment, and that female Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) slightly exceeds male GER. Higher education, building upon secondary education, imparts specialised skills and advanced knowledge that enable individuals to improve their socio-economic status and engage with complex moral, social, economic, and cultural problems. Yet, despite these developments, participation remains stratified: men and women do not attain higher education in equal numbers across disciplines, levels, regions, and social groups, and enrolment data continue to reveal gendered and intersectional disparities.

Against this backdrop, the present paper focuses on women's attainment of higher education in India, with particular attention to enrolment figures and their evolution over time. By revisiting trends in women's enrolment for higher studies across levels, disciplines, and social categories, and by situating these patterns within broader debates on human capital and gender, the study seeks to illuminate both progress and persisting gaps in women's educational participation relative to men.

If India is to realise its ambition of being an inclusive democracy in a substantive sense, it must secure meaningful empowerment for women across caste, class, religion, region, and rural–urban divides, rather than relying on formal political rights alone. Although Indian women obtained voting rights at independence and are constitutionally entitled to contest elections from village councils to Parliament, empirical research documents that many continue to experience “proxy” representation, acting as rubber stamps while male relatives exercise *de facto* power on their behalf. Creating genuine opportunities for women from historically marginalised communities to participate in political, economic, and social decision-making is therefore central to the success of inclusive democracy.

International and Indian evidence consistently identifies women as key agents of transformational economic, environmental, and social change required for sustainable development, with their roles as workers, caregivers, knowledge producers, and community leaders all shaped by educational opportunities. Empowering women is crucial not only for the wellbeing of individual families and communities but also for macroeconomic performance, given their large share in the labour force and their pivotal contributions to cultural reproduction, child-rearing, and intergenerational transmission of capabilities.

The development of human capabilities and skills depends to a significant extent on the quality and level of education, with higher education playing a central role in the production of technology and human capital for competitive economies. The World Bank's **Higher Education: The Lessons of Experience** and subsequent human capital literature emphasise that tertiary education expands the stock of specialised knowledge and innovation potential, thereby enhancing productivity and growth prospects. Studies by Azariadis and Drazen (1990), McMahon (1999), Tilak and others show that while primary education provides a threshold for growth, investment in secondary and higher education - including science and technology - is critical to sustain high growth trajectories and broader human development.

Choices regarding careers and occupations over the life course are influenced by social characteristics, family income, parental education and occupation, personal interests and abilities, and the availability and quality of higher-education opportunities. Appropriate higher education channels prior learning into employment and entrepreneurial activity, providing specific knowledge and skills required for particular jobs and enhancing women's bargaining power in both household and labour-market settings. In this sense, higher education functions as a key determinant of women's empowerment, reinforcing their decision-making capacity, economic independence, and ability to participate effectively in socio-political processes.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The review of literature provides a comprehensive understanding of the existing research on higher education and women's empowerment. It helps to identify the major findings, theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches adopted by previous studies. The literature review highlights the relationship between education and different dimensions of women's empowerment, including social, economic and political aspects. It also helps in identifying research gaps and justifying the need for the present study in the context of Himachal Pradesh. Thus, it provides a strong foundation for developing the objectives, methodology and framework of the proposed research.

Agarwal (2001) examined the relationship between women's access to resources, education and their bargaining position within the household. The study argued that education alone is not sufficient for empowerment unless women also have access to productive resources and opportunities. It highlighted the importance of combining educational advancement with economic independence. The study provides a useful foundation for examining education as a component of multidimensional women's empowerment.

Cheston and Kuhn (2002) examined the relationship between education, economic opportunities and women's empowerment. They argued that education enhances women's knowledge, confidence and ability to participate in economic activities. However, education needs to be supported by employment, credit and income-generating opportunities. The study is particularly relevant to understanding the economic dimension of women's empowerment.

Morrison, et.al (2007) examined gender equality and women's economic opportunities in South Asia. Their analysis identified education as an important factor influencing women's labour-market participation and economic status. However, social norms, occupational segregation and limited employment opportunities can restrict the benefits of education. The study therefore suggests that educational attainment should be analysed along with economic and institutional factors.

Beaman et al. (2012) investigated the impact of female political leadership on girls' aspirations and educational attainment in rural India. Their findings showed that exposure to female leaders increased girls' aspirations and educational outcomes. The study demonstrates that empowerment can influence social attitudes and future opportunities through role-model effects. It is particularly relevant to the social and political dimensions of women's empowerment.

Duflo (2012) examined the two-way relationship between women's empowerment and economic development. The study argued that economic development can improve women's position, while women's empowerment can also contribute to economic development. However, economic growth alone does not automatically eliminate gender inequality. The study highlights the need for institutional and policy interventions alongside economic progress.

Bhat (2015) examined the role of education in women's empowerment in India. The study considered education an important instrument for improving women's social position, awareness and participation in family and society. It further suggested that education can help women challenge traditional gender roles and respond more effectively to social and economic challenges. The study supports the significance of education as an important determinant of women's empowerment.

Tripathy (2018) analysed the role of education in women's empowerment and emphasised the importance of education, employment and changing social structures. The study conceptualised empowerment as a process involving improvements in women's capabilities, status and participation. It suggested that educational advancement should be accompanied by wider social and economic transformation. This provides support for analysing empowerment through multiple dimensions.

Sharma and Sharma (2021) examined the role of higher education in women's empowerment. The study highlighted that higher education can improve women's knowledge, skills, self-confidence and awareness of rights. It can also strengthen women's position within the family and society. The study is directly relevant to the present research because it focuses specifically on higher education and women's empowerment.

Mayya et al. (2021) examined women's participation in higher education and their readiness to occupy administrative leadership positions. The study identified institutional barriers, perceptions and socio-cultural factors affecting women's advancement. Its findings suggest that access to higher education does not automatically result in leadership or decision-making power. This highlights the importance of examining the wider socio-cultural and institutional context of empowerment.

Kumar and Santhosh (2021) examined women's participation in higher education through a case study of Karnataka. The study highlighted the importance of higher education in improving women's social position and opportunities. However, its geographical focus was limited to Karnataka. This provides scope for similar state-level empirical research in Himachal Pradesh, particularly using a multidimensional measure of women's empowerment.

Research Gap

The existing literature indicates that education and particularly higher education play an important role in improving women's knowledge, confidence, employment opportunities, decision-making and social participation. However, most existing studies focus either on education in general or on individual dimensions of empowerment. There is comparatively limited micro-level empirical research on the relationship between higher education and multidimensional women's empowerment in Himachal Pradesh. In particular, the combined influence of higher education on social, economic, political empowerment, mobility and household decision-making remains insufficiently explored. The proposed study therefore attempts to fill this research gap by empirically examining the relationship between higher education and multidimensional women's empowerment in Himachal Pradesh.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of this study are formulated to examine the relationship between women's higher education and empowerment in India by integrating recent empirical evidence, socio-economic perspectives, and contemporary policy frameworks."

- To analyse trends and patterns of women's participation in higher education in India using GER and AISHE data.
- To examine the role of higher education in enhancing women's capabilities, employment, decision-making and empowerment.
- To understand the need for women's empowerment in India in the context of gender inequalities.
- To identify socio-cultural, economic and institutional barriers affecting women's access to higher education.
- To assess the contribution of women's empowerment towards inclusive growth and sustainable development.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the role of higher education in promoting women's empowerment in India. The

descriptive approach is used to analyse trends, patterns, and gender-wise participation of women in higher education, while the analytical approach helps in interpreting the relationship between higher education and various dimensions of women's empowerment. The study is based on secondary data obtained from the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) reports and relevant scholarly literature. The research design enables a systematic understanding of women's educational progress, existing challenges, and the broader socio-economic implications of higher education for women's empowerment in India.

Research Area

The research area of the study focuses on the relationship between women's participation in higher education and their empowerment in India. It examines the role of higher education in improving women's educational access, capabilities, employment opportunities, decision-making capacity, and social participation. The study particularly emphasizes gender disparities, enrolment patterns, and discipline-wise participation of women in higher education.

Data Collection

The study is based on secondary data sources collected from reliable and nationally recognised publications. The major source of data is the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) reports, particularly AISHE 2022–23 and previous rounds, published by the Ministry of Education, Government of India. The data includes information on women's enrolment, Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), gender-wise participation, and discipline-wise distribution in higher education. In addition, relevant research papers, government reports, policy documents, and academic publications related to women's education and empowerment are reviewed to provide theoretical and contextual support to the study.

Data Analysis

The collected secondary data from AISHE reports and other relevant sources are analysed using descriptive statistical techniques. The study uses simple statistical tools such as percentage analysis, comparative analysis, and trend analysis to examine women's participation in higher education. The findings are presented through tables, bar diagrams, pie charts, and graphical representations to clearly explain trends in enrolment, Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), and faculty-wise participation of women in higher education. These methods help in understanding the progress, disparities, and emerging patterns related to women's empowerment through higher education in India.

Need of the Study

The need of the study arises from the fact that despite significant progress in women's educational attainment, gender inequalities continue to exist in areas such as employment, economic independence, decision-making, and social participation. Higher education plays a crucial role in enhancing women's skills, confidence, agency, and empowerment. Therefore, analysing the trends and patterns of women's participation in higher education is essential for understanding its contribution to gender equality, inclusive growth, and sustainable development in India.

Scope of the Study

The scope of the study is confined to examining the role of higher education in promoting women’s empowerment in India. The study focuses on women’s participation in higher education in terms of enrolment, Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), gender-wise participation, and discipline-wise distribution. It analyses trends and changes in women’s access to higher education using secondary data from AISHE reports, particularly for the recent period and previous survey rounds. The study also considers the broader implications of higher education for women’s employment opportunities, economic independence, decision-making capacity, social participation, and overall empowerment. Geographically, the study covers India at the national level and does not undertake a primary survey of individual states or households. The study is primarily descriptive and analytical in nature and aims to provide an overall understanding of how higher education contributes to women’s empowerment and gender equality in contemporary India.

RESULTS

Growth in Enrolment of Women in Higher Education; Women’s participation in higher education in India has witnessed remarkable progress since independence. In the early years after independence, women constituted a very small proportion of total higher education enrolment. However, continuous expansion of educational opportunities, policy interventions, and increasing awareness have resulted in substantial growth in female enrolment over the decades. The number of women students enrolled in higher education has increased significantly from around 40,000 in 1950–51 to approximately 1.05 crore in 2013–14 and further to 2.24 crore in 2023–24. The ratio of women students per hundred men has also improved considerably, increasing from 14 in 1950–51 to 79.87 in 2013–14 and crossing gender parity with 108 women per 100 men in 2023–24. This indicates a significant improvement in women’s access to higher education and reflects the changing socio-economic position of women in India. The trend highlights the effectiveness of educational policies and institutional expansion in promoting gender equality in higher education..

Table 1: Women Students per Hundred Men Students

Year	Total Women Enrolment	Women Enrolment per Hundred Men
1950–51	40,000	14
2013–14	1,05,52,000	79.87
2023–24	2,24,00,000	108

Source: AISHE Reports and relevant secondary sources.

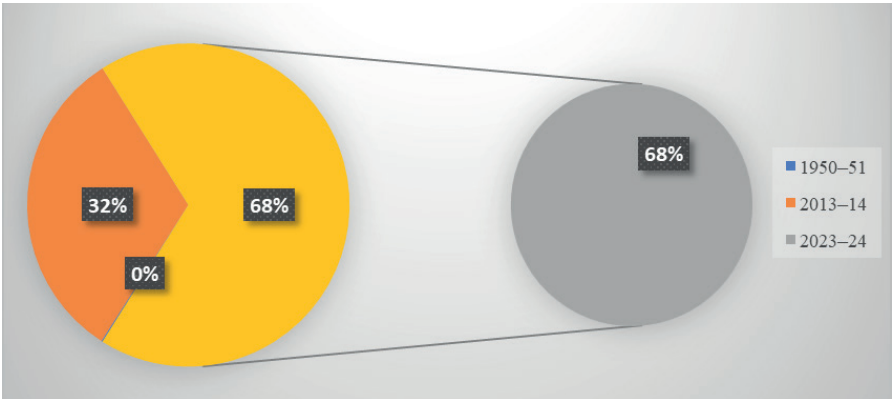


Figure 1: Gender-wise Distribution of Students in Higher Education in India (2023–24)

The pie chart presents the gender-wise distribution of students enrolled in higher education in India during 2023–24. The figure indicates that women’s participation in higher education has increased substantially, reflecting the progress towards gender equality in educational access. Women constitute a significant share of total enrolment, which highlights the positive impact of educational policies, institutional expansion, and increased awareness among women. However, the distribution also suggests the need for continued efforts to ensure equal opportunities, retention, and participation of women across all disciplines and levels of higher education.

Distribution of Women Enrolment by State and Faculty: Women’s enrolment in higher education varies across different states and faculties due to differences in socio-economic conditions, educational infrastructure, and cultural factors. States with better educational facilities show higher female participation. Faculty-wise, women’s enrolment is relatively higher in Arts, Humanities, Education, and Social Sciences, while participation in technical and professional fields remains comparatively lower. The analysis highlights regional and disciplinary variations in women’s access to higher education.

Distribution of Women Enrolment by Faculty: The faculty-wise distribution of women’s enrolment in higher education during 2022–23 shows that women’s participation is concentrated mainly in traditional and general education streams. **Arts, Science, Commerce, and Engineering & Technology together accounted for around 54.95% of total female enrolment**, indicating their significant contribution to women’s access to higher education. The remaining enrolment was distributed across other professional and specialized disciplines, reflecting gradual diversification in women’s educational choices.

Table 2: Faculty-wise Distribution of Women Enrolment in Higher Education (2022–23)

S. No.	Faculty	Women Enrolment	Percentage to Total Women Enrolment
1	Arts	5,989,501	27.99%
2	Science	2,475,744	11.60%

3	Commerce	2,048,778	9.60%
4	Engineering & Technology	1,229,918	5.76%
5	Education	1,142,475	5.35%
6	Medical Science	1,130,720	5.30%
7	Social Science	663,057	3.10%
8	Management	370,180	1.73%
9	Indian Language	227,620	1.07%
10	Law	191,641	0.90%
11	Foreign Language	123,891	0.58%
12	Agriculture	88,047	0.41%
13	Home Science	78,339	0.37%
14	Information Technology	75,020	0.35%
15	Paramedical Science	47,013	0.22%
16	Design	35,952	0.17%
17	Library & Information Science	28,742	0.13%
18	Fine Arts	27,251	0.13%
19	Physical Education	23,420	0.11%
20	Oriental Learning	20,079	0.09%
21	Area Studies	19,575	0.09%
22	Social Work	18,737	0.09%
23	Journalism & Mass Communication	16,976	0.08%
24	Fashion Technology	15,318	0.07%
25	Veterinary & Animal Sciences	10,729	0.05%
26	Fisheries Science	3,259	0.02%
27	Cultural Studies	4,134	0.02%
28	Statistics & Other Minor Disciplines	5,889	0.03%
Total	Grand Total	21,349,320	100.00%

Source: All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) Report 2022–23, Ministry of Education, Government of India.

Table 2 presents the faculty-wise distribution of women's enrolment in higher education in India during 2022–23. The data reveals that women's participation is highly concentrated in a few major disciplines. Arts recorded the highest enrolment with 5,989,501 students, accounting for 27.99% of total women enrolment, followed by Science (11.60%), Commerce (9.60%), and Engineering & Technology (5.76%). Together, these major faculties represent a significant share of female participation in higher education. Other important fields such as Education (5.35%), Medical Science (5.30%), and Social Science (3.10%) also show considerable participation of women. However, enrolment remains relatively low in specialised areas such as Agriculture, Information Technology, Design, and other emerging disciplines.

The pattern indicates that while women’s access to higher education has improved substantially, their participation is still uneven across different fields of study. Greater encouragement and institutional support are required to enhance women’s representation in technical, professional, and emerging areas for achieving balanced gender participation in higher education.

State-wise Distribution of Women Enrolment: During 2013-14, distribution of women enrolment by state shows that the percentage increase has been almost minimal in the enrolment of women as compared to the total enrolment in all the states over the preceding year. Among the states and UTs, Daman and Diu had the highest percentage (68.55%), followed by Goa with 60.23% in terms of women enrolment as a percentage of total enrolment of the state. There are 22 states/UTs which had higher enrolment of women than the national percentage of 44.40%. In the rest of the states, the percentage of women enrolled had been less than the national average with Arunachal Pradesh recording the lowest women enrolment of 36.82% only. In absolute numbers, Uttar Pradesh State had been on the top in enrolling women students (16.77 lakhs), followed by Maharashtra (12.54 lakhs) and Tamil Nadu (11.12 lakhs), etc.

Table 3: Number of Female Students per Hundred Male Students Enrolled in Higher Education in India

Year	Women Enrolment Rate (Per 100 Males)
1950–51	13
1960–61	21
1970–71	28
1980–81	36
1990–91	46
2000–01	58
2010–11	78
2020–21	95
2023–24	Approximately 99

Source: AISHE Reports and relevant secondary sources.

The data shows a continuous increase in the participation of women in higher education in India. In 1950–51, there were only 13 female students for every 100 male students, indicating a large gender gap. This ratio gradually increased to 36 in 1980–81, 46 in 1990–91 and 58 in 2000–01. The improvement became more rapid after 2000, reaching 78 in 2010–11 and 95 in 2020–21. By 2023–24, the number had reached approximately 99 female students per 100 male students, indicating that gender parity in higher education is almost achieved. Overall, the trend reflects significant improvement in women’s access to higher education and highlights the growing importance of education in women’s empowerment and socio-economic development in India.

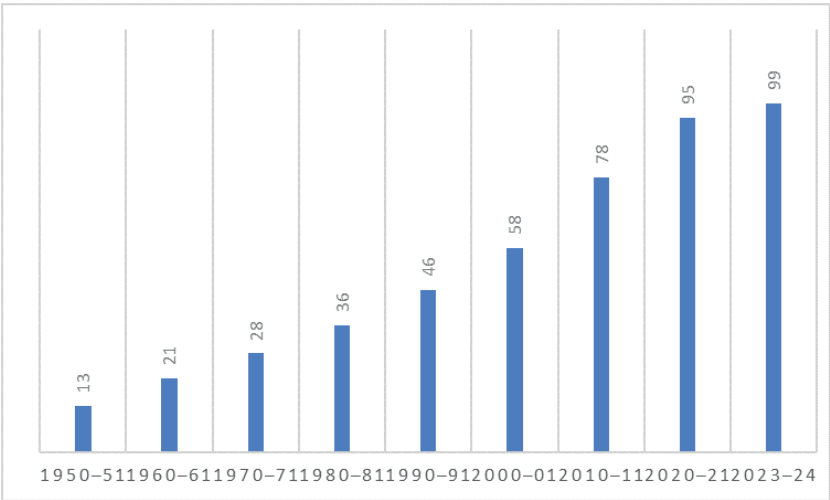


Figure 2: Trend of Female Students per Hundred Male Students in Higher Education in India (1950–51 to 2023–24)

The bar diagram illustrates the gradual improvement in women’s participation in higher education in India over the period from 1950–51 to 2023–24. The number of female students per 100 male students increased consistently from 13 in 1950–51 to approximately 99 in 2023–24. The upward trend indicates a continuous reduction in the gender gap in higher education. This progress reflects the impact of educational policies, expansion of higher educational institutions, and increased awareness regarding women’s education.

Table 4: Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Higher Education by Gender in India

Year	Men	Women	Total
2001–02	9.3	6.7	8.1
2005–06	13.5	9.4	11.6
2010–11	20.8	17.9	19.4
2015–16	25.4	23.5	24.5
2018–19	26.3	26.4	26.3
2020–21	26.7	27.9	27.3
2021–22	28.3	28.5	28.4
2022–23	28.9	30.2	29.5
2023–24	28.9	31.2	30.0

Source: All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) Reports, Ministry of Education, Government of India.

Table 4 presents the trend of **Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education by gender in India** from 2001–02 to 2023–24. The data shows a continuous increase in the participation of both men and women in higher education. Women’s GER increased significantly from **6.7% in 2001–02 to 31.2% in 2023–**

24, indicating substantial improvement in female access to higher education. The gender gap in GER has gradually narrowed over the years. In 2018–19, women's GER (26.4%) surpassed men's GER (26.3%), and this trend continued in subsequent years. By 2023–24, women's GER reached 31.2% compared to 28.9% for men, reflecting progress towards gender equality in higher education.

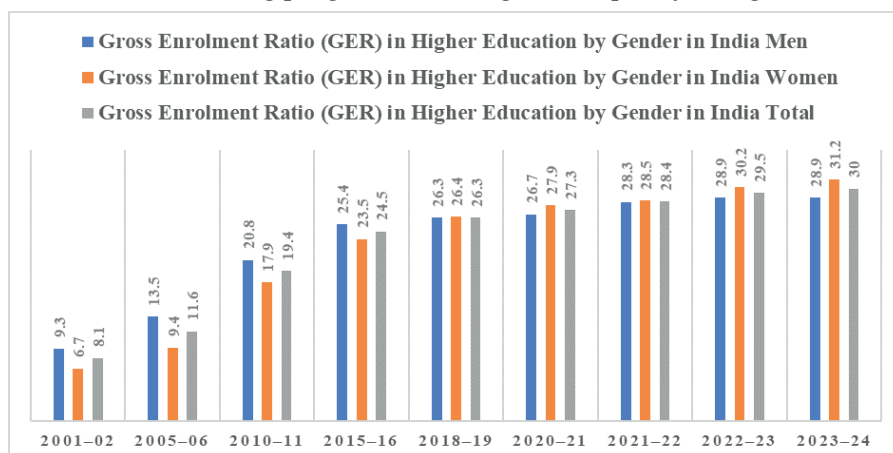


Figure 3: Gender-wise Trend of Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Higher Education in India (2001–02 to 2023–24)

Figure 3 presents the gender-wise trend of Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education in India from 2001–02 to 2023–24. The figure shows a continuous increase in GER for both men and women over the period. Women's GER increased from 6.7% in 2001–02 to 31.2% in 2023–24, indicating significant improvement in female participation in higher education.

The gender gap in higher education has gradually declined, and since 2018–19, women's GER has remained higher than men's GER. In 2023–24, women recorded a GER of 31.2% compared to 28.9% for men, showing progress towards gender parity. The rising trend reflects the positive impact of educational policies, increased awareness, and expansion of higher education opportunities for women in India. However, further efforts are required to ensure equal participation across regions, disciplines, and socio-economic groups.

DISCUSSION

Role of Higher Education in Women Empowerment: Higher education acts as a powerful instrument for enhancing women's capabilities, confidence, and independence. It improves women's knowledge, skills, employment opportunities, and decision-making capacity. Educated women become more aware of their rights and social responsibilities. Higher education also promotes leadership qualities, critical thinking, and greater participation in social, economic, and political activities. Thus, it contributes significantly to women's overall empowerment and social transformation.

Barriers to Women Empowerment through Higher Education: Despite significant progress in women's enrolment, several barriers continue to limit

the empowering potential of higher education. Socio-cultural norms, early marriage, household responsibilities, and gender discrimination affect women's educational opportunities. Economic constraints, safety concerns, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to institutions particularly affect rural and disadvantaged women. Addressing these challenges is essential for achieving inclusive and equitable higher education.

Gender Equality and Participation in Higher Education: The increasing participation of women in higher education indicates positive movement towards gender equality in India. The rise in female GER and enrolment reflects improved access and changing social attitudes towards women's education. However, disparities remain in discipline choices, leadership positions, and participation in technical and professional fields. Promoting equal opportunities across all areas of higher education remains a key priority.

Higher Education and Economic Empowerment of Women: Higher education enhances women's economic empowerment by improving employability, skills, and income-generating opportunities. Educated women are more likely to participate in the labour market and contribute to household and national economic development. It also reduces economic dependency and strengthens women's bargaining power within families. Therefore, investment in women's education has wider economic and social benefits.

Policy Directions for Promoting Women's Higher Education: Effective policies are required to increase women's participation and ensure equal benefits from higher education. Measures such as scholarships, financial support, improved infrastructure, safe learning environments, and digital access can encourage greater participation of women. Special attention should be given to rural, economically weaker, and socially disadvantaged groups. Strengthening these initiatives will support inclusive and sustainable development.

Future Prospects of Women's Empowerment through Higher Education: The future of women's empowerment in India largely depends on expanding quality higher education opportunities. Higher education can enable women to become active contributors to economic growth, innovation, and social development. Greater participation of women in research, leadership, and emerging fields will further strengthen gender equality. Thus, higher education remains a vital pathway for building an inclusive and empowered society.

CHALLENGES IN PROMOTING WOMEN'S HIGHER EDUCATION

Socio-Cultural Barriers: Traditional gender norms, early marriage, and family responsibilities often restrict women's access to and continuation of higher education.

Economic Constraints: High educational costs, limited financial resources, and lack of scholarships create barriers, especially for women from economically weaker sections.

Regional and Infrastructural Disparities: Limited availability of colleges, inadequate transportation, hostel facilities, and digital access affect women's participation, particularly in rural areas.

Safety and Institutional Challenges: Concerns related to campus safety, harassment, and lack of gender-sensitive institutional environments discourage women from pursuing higher education.

Disciplinary and Career Gaps: Women's participation remains comparatively lower in STEM, research, leadership positions, and employment-oriented professional fields due to persistent gender stereotypes.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ENHANCING WOMEN'S HIGHER EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT

Improving Access and Affordability: Expansion of higher educational institutions, scholarships, fee support, and financial assistance should be strengthened, especially for rural and disadvantaged women.

Strengthening Infrastructure and Safety Measures: Safe transportation, hostel facilities, sanitation, and gender-sensitive campus environments should be ensured to encourage women's participation.

Promoting Participation in Diverse Disciplines: Special initiatives should be taken to encourage women's enrolment in STEM, professional courses, research, and emerging fields.

Skill Development and Employment Linkages: Higher education should be integrated with skill development, entrepreneurship, and employment-oriented programmes to enhance economic empowerment.

Creating Gender-Sensitive Policies and Awareness: Awareness programmes on women's rights, gender equality, and educational opportunities should be promoted at community and institutional levels.

Enhancing Leadership and Decision-Making Opportunities: Greater representation of women in academic leadership, research, and institutional decision-making should be encouraged to achieve meaningful empowerment.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights that higher education is a powerful instrument for achieving women's empowerment in India by enhancing their knowledge, skills, confidence, employment opportunities, and decision-making capacity. Recent AISHE data indicate significant improvement in women's participation in higher education, with female GER surpassing male GER, reflecting progress towards gender equality. However, challenges such as socio-cultural barriers, regional disparities, economic constraints, and lower participation in STEM and leadership areas continue to limit the full benefits of higher education. Therefore, ensuring equal access, quality education, skill development, financial support, and safe learning environments is essential. Strengthening women's higher education will contribute not only to individual empowerment but also to inclusive growth, social transformation, and sustainable development in India.

Acknowledgement

I sincerely acknowledge the valuable support and contributions of all those who helped in the completion of this research work. I am grateful to the Ministry of Education, Government of India, for providing the AISHE reports and statistical information used in this study. I also extend my thanks to the researchers, scholars, and authors whose studies and publications provided important insights and helped in developing the conceptual framework of the research. I am thankful to my institution, colleagues, and all individuals who provided encouragement and support throughout this work. Their valuable contributions have played an important role in the successful completion of this study.

REFERENCES

- Agarwal, B. (2001). Participatory exclusions, community forestry, and gender: An analysis for South Asia and a conceptual framework. *World Development*, 29(10), 1623–1648.
- Beaman, L., Duflo, E., Pande, R., & Topalova, P. (2012). Female leadership raises aspirations and educational attainment for girls: A policy experiment in India. *Science*, 335(6068), 582–586. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1212382>
- Bhat, R. A. (2015). Role of education in the empowerment of women in India. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(10), 188–191.
- Duflo, E. (2012). Women empowerment and economic development. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 50(4), 1051–1079. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.50.4.1051>
- Hazra, M. (2017). Role of higher education in women empowerment and development. *International Journal of Current Advanced Research*, 6(8), 5289–5291. <https://doi.org/10.24327/ijcar.2017.5291.0691>
- Mayya, S. S., Martis, M., Ashok, L., & Monteiro, A. D. (2021). Women in higher education: Are they ready to take up administrative positions? A mixed-methods approach to identify the barriers, perceptions, and expectations. *SAGE Open*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020983272>
- Morrison, A., Raju, D., & Sinha, N. (2007). *Gender equality, poverty and economic growth*. World Bank.
- Prashanth Kumar, C. P., & Santhosh, V. (2021). A study on importance of women participants in higher education: A case study of Karnataka, India. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(6), 101–112.
- Sharma, P., & Sharma, M. (2021). Role of higher education in women empowerment. *Psychology and Education Journal*, 58(2), 544–550.
- Tripathy, D. P. (2018). Role of education in women empowerment. *IJRDO-Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, 3(3), 1–14.