

Restructuring Indian Higher Education: Strategies for Women's Empowerment

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1. Introduction

Education is a basic requirement and a fundamental right for the citizens of a free nation. It is also of increasing strategic importance in the new environment of knowledge and information technology based globalized economy. Education plays a catalytic role in a country's socio-economic development and is one of the principal means available for a deeper and harmonious form of human development reducing poverty, ignorance and exclusion. Higher Education, which is a training ground for a professional, research-based, career-oriented future, must be respected as a potential instrument for bringing about social transformation and ensuring the success of democracy. Education must be provided to all categories of citizens by breaking down constraints and barriers. Once students have completed primary and secondary education, attention must focus on increasing participation of men and women equally in the field of Higher Education. The Indian National Policy of Education recognizes this when it states 'Wider women's access to vocational, technical and professional education at all levels, breaking gender stereotypes, will ensure better financial stability for women and lead to national development'.

2. Women's Empowerment

Gender discrimination has been a major obstacle in granting equal opportunity for women in Higher Education. It has been identified as a crucial category and deserves attention in the education-equality paradigm. Today, women's education has become an issue of debate within which it is now necessary to shift the focus from women's intellectual development to women's autonomy in decision-making, freedom of expression and control over resources. Empowerment is the manifestation of a redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology, transforming the institutions that reinforce or perpetuate gender discrimination. The parameters of empowerment have been identified as

1. Developing ability for critical thinking;
2. Fostering decision-making and action through collective processes;
3. Ensuring equal participation in developmental processes;
4. Enhancing self-esteem and self confidence in women.

The time has arrived to realize the relevance, in a rapidly developing country like India, of education for leadership-building, especially for women –something which can be achieved only through Higher Education.

3. Concerns and Directions of Higher Education

Education is an end in itself as well as a means of realizing other desirable ends. In our world of unpredictable social and technological changes, education has taken on a particular significance as a means of understanding and coping with such complexities. The knowledge explosion, supported by tools of information and communication technologies, is a driving force of the Indian economy, facilitating a better quality of life. Thus Indian Higher Education needs to reorient itself to become more

vibrant, competitive, meaningful and purposive. In the emerging global environment, women are required to develop a more skilled approach to cope with the rapid multiple changing environments. If Higher Education is to thrive within contemporary realities, then there needs to be a shift from exclusive reliance on a masculine-orientated curriculum to a more developed market-oriented content that is comprehensively suited to the entire population. Higher Education is a means to achieve vertical mobility which can counteract the deep divisions that exist in society.

3.1 Integration of Women in Development

Since access to education allows each person the opportunity to gain an understanding of self as well as of society and its resources, equal educational opportunities should be available to both men and women. Equality and social access became major goals of Higher Education in post-independence India. In 1948-49 the University Education Commission commented that colleges should be established that would serve both men and women simultaneously for Higher Education but, nonetheless, gender inequalities in access to Higher Education have continued through decades. The target of Higher Education is to provide women's access to vocational, technical, professional education and emergent technologies. Identification of skills and occupations suitable for women should be based on the employment potential of women.

Over the years, these four challenges have been faced by Higher Education:

1. To introduce more disciplines and diversity;
2. To satisfy the social demands for new options;
3. To remove gender barriers and role stereotyping;
4. To enable enrolment of women for purposes of productivity and of empowerment

The questions that we need to explore are (a) Will Higher Education institutions and their leaders respond to the required changes? (b) What measures are to be devised to exploit women's potential and promote their subsequent empowerment?

3.3 Women in Higher Education

The first of the following tables reflects the gender status of literacy at high school completion. The remaining two provide gender disaggregated data on participation in Higher Education.

Table 1.1 Male-Female Literacy Rates in India – as Percentages of Population

Year	Male	Female	Percentage
1971	45.95	21.97	34.45
1981	53.45	28.46	41.42
1991	64.13	39.29	52.21
2001	75.85	51.16	65.38
2001(Rural)	71.40	46.70	59.40
2001(Urban)	86.70	73.20	80.30

Table 1.2 Enrolments in Higher Education as percentage of total

Year	Women	Men
1991-92	32.0	68.9
1992-93	32.7	78.1
1993-94	33.2	66.8
1994-95	33.8	66.2
1995-96	34.1	65.9
1996-97	34.1	65.9

Table 1.3 Enrolment of Women in University: by Faculty

Discipline	Total Enrollment	Women Enrolled	% of women to Total Enrolment
Arts	1,591,012	687,069	43.2
Eng / Technology	181,604	11,263	6.2
Law	228,979	20,024	8.7
Commerce	848,804	173,957	20.5
Science	777,740	253,427	32.6
Medicine	142,125	45,054	31.7
Education	90,803	47,557	52.4

Complicating an understanding of these data are widespread disparities in enrolment by region, caste and tribe, nonetheless there is evidence that:

1. The percentage of women students in the Faculties of Law, Engineering and Technology is markedly low as compared to male enrolments
2. Compared with nearly 22% of female students overall, only a little over 14% are enrolled in the Commerce Stream.
3. 54% of women are concentrated in Arts and Humanities, as against 40% of males.

4. The Redefined View of Higher Education

Traditional concepts acknowledge Higher Education as an instrument of personal development, by expanding an individual's intellectual horizons, interests and potential for empowerment and a better quality of life. It has also been taken to be a vehicle of social engineering that conforms people to social values. Theodore Schultz and Mary Backer emphasized the role of Higher Education in the transformation of human beings to human capital.

With the unveiling of economic reform policies, the role of Higher Education is being reinterpreted and redefined. Market-promoting policies are posing a challenge to Higher Education, and are being considered as both a driving force of economic development and the focal point of learning in a society.

Higher Education has assumed responsibility for transmitting accumulated knowledge both cultural and scientific. The effect of innovation and technological progress will increasingly demand competencies and pose challenges requiring more dynamism in the course content. Higher Education needs to be reoriented to increase women's access to traditionally male dominated courses and equip them to take up entrepreneurial management and leadership roles and responsibilities.

The three specific needs related to women and Higher Education are:

- Recognition of women as an essential human resource base of each country;
- A strong commitment to equip women with the necessary range of managerial skills empowering them in their decision making role;
- Institution of a feminine leadership model suited to the needs of social development across all sectors.

4.1 Role of Universities: Empowering Agents of Higher Education

To be effective agents of empowerment through Higher Education, universities need to give attention to:

- Mass motivation and mobilization – dissemination of information through newsletters and other social agencies;
- Literacy Promotion: preparation of training packages and development of learning materials;
- Techno–pedagogic inputs: Preparation of data based information and transference of matter into technological display;
- Network Culture: monitor activities related to women's studies and women's movements and recommend better implementation.
- Women and Research: The University Grants Committee has agreed to provide part-time research associate ships to 100 girls every year
- Special access for women: Women students from scheduled caste and tribes in India will be eligible for Government schemes of scholarship, coaching assistance and remedial classes

4.2 Globalization and Challenges of the Century

Globalization has effected changes in educational systems owing to the introduction and exercise of technological and communication developments. Twenty-first century India is facing a number of challenges in the field of education. Adjustment to social demands for new options in Higher Education and for removal of gender barriers is creating pressures on educational leaders. Higher Education is finding it difficult to meet the challenges of a knowledge explosion, uneven growth and inequities in policies. As a consequence, there is a fall in standards, posing a serious threat to India's national development. Strategies to provide management training and research work for women are the areas which Higher Education needs to address to promote women's advancement and empowerment. Evidence of a paradigm shift from pure industrialization to an information-based society is present. From a gender perspective, the questions that arise are:

- a) Does the curriculum content promote research and gender equality?
- b) Does the learning environment foster assertiveness and empowerment in girls?

- c) How will the education system foster sensitization of members towards girls' Higher Education and empowerment?
- d) Will limited participation in humanities and social sciences help women and society?
- e) Will Higher Education help women's transition from emancipation to empowerment?

4.3 Diversity and Dynamism in the Higher Education Curriculum

A restructured curriculum envisaging skill-based, gender-sensitized schemes and guidance services facilitating employment is the responsibility of Higher Education.

To keep abreast of social conditions, social surveys need to check:

- a) The reasons responsible for the poor utilization and participation in the technological advance by women? and
- b) What measures need to be implemented for women to make use of technological improvements?

The lack of educational and training facilities for studying science and the type of employment available for women holds them back. Thus one of the thrust areas of Higher Education is to include technology studies to help women's development in research and employment. Academic policy designing must include the enrolment of more women to ensure 'Productivity Ethics' – to increase women's productivity is imperative. Mass communication is therefore becoming increasingly significant as a University course. In India, a technological course for women is prevalent whereby financial assistance is provided to initiate engineering and technology for a period of five years along with training women faculty managers and administrators. To invite participation of women in science and research, fellowships and projects are being given to women to seek affiliation in the local laboratories close to their residences. The funding of courses on science, vocational and professional degrees is made mandatory in women's colleges.

4.4 Technical Education and Human Resource Development

Being the apex of the educational pyramid, Higher Education takes responsibility for providing people with an ability to reflect on the critical, social, economic and cultural issues of a nation. Today, technical education is a significant component of Human Resource Development within which women must be included. Preparation of women as part of human capital, having a great potential for adding value to products and services, is being improved by modernization, promoting institutions-industry interaction, and training women to meet the emerging challenges of science and technology. For this, women are being trained for research, consultancy management and implementation of policies to suit the needs of the industrial society. The UNESCO taskforce commented 'without improved human capital, countries will inevitably fall behind and experience intellectual and economic marginalization and isolation'. In cognizance of this, interdisciplinary and relevant curriculum content with an unbiased open door admission policy for women at par with men is the recent strategy of Higher Education.

5. Higher Education: Vocational Guidance and Self-Employment for Women in India

In India, career guidance and counseling courses in women's colleges are responding to social and market demands with a healthy amalgam of tradition and modernity. With a view to controlling

unemployment and increasing women's self-employment, counseling courses, career fairs, exhibitions and seminars are organized to disseminate information, cultivate the required skills and enable women to be productively employed to serve society with dignity. Women are developing self-confidence, self-esteem and a sense of financial security by way of skill cultivation to be entrepreneurs.

A recent shift to provide more options better suited to women is visible in Indian Higher Education. Courses such as Computer Science, Electronics, Information Technology, Home Science, Law and Governance, Molecular Medicine are significant inclusions in the curriculum. Courses in Fashion Designing, Clinical Nutrients and Dietetics, Nursing and Business Administration are also present. Personality development and spoken English classes, commercial and secretarial practice, Media careers, Public Relations, Advertising, Garment Technology, Hotel and Catering studies are offered as certified courses.

Unconventional course inclusions that exploit the creative potentialities of a candidate like event management, puppetry workshops, television script writing, and aviation law are now available to women students. The Indian Business School, in liaison with Goldman Sachs of USA, has introduced a specialized MBA management degree for women. These new courses aim to provide women students with hands on training building competency to access jobs against competition. In addition to these, the Life Insurance Corporation of India conducts a three month crash course to train those women who need financial assistance for healthy survival.

5.1 Strategies of Empowerment: Higher Education and the Indian Perspective

The Indian National Policy on Education (NPE) is a landmark in the approach to women's education when it proclaims: 'The Education System will play a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women. It will foster the development of new values through redesigned curricula, textbooks, training and orientation of teachers, decision makers and administrators'. The programme implementation explains women's empowerment through collective reflection and decision-making. For this Higher Education needs to take responsibility for:

- Cultivation of positive self-image and self-confidence;
- Developing capacity for critical thinking;
- Achieving group cohesion and fostering decision-making and action;
- Providing women's centers in Agricultural and Home Science Colleges;
- Providing Continuing Education and Correspondence Centers for organizing vocational and literary skills;
- Revamping the Industrial Training Institutes in terms of diversification of trades and courses, keeping in view the job potential, facilities for vocational counseling, imparting information about credit, banking, entrepreneurial development and access to women's technical education;
- Providing Women's Studies Research centers to identify issues and areas and organize seminars and workshops to discuss and analyze women-related issues and disseminate information and encourage interaction with students and the general public through the media';
- Providing classes on legal literacy, programmes for women's socio- economic development delivered via media, adult education and information and training support;
- A more relevant and responsive curriculum catering to the cultural and occupational needs of women;

- Meeting the expenses of higher education for the rural, backward sections with incentives like scholarships and frees places;
- Meeting the requirement of achieving full integration of women within the democratic and developmental efforts of the country.

Curricular reform should include compulsory exposure to and engagement with different kinds of work in the form of summer jobs or internships, according to the circumstances and needs of the female population. Training must include manual and technical exposure to master operational techniques. Evaluation must project an analytical study to check the extent to which women have become capable of applying themselves and being problem solvers.

5.2 Gender-fair Education

The main challenge to women's Higher Education is to provide gender-fair education to all citizens. Gender-fair education involves an aggressive move away from emphasis on separate and complementary spheres for men and women and on gender-stereotyped careers to expanded options and outcomes. The attainment of equality, rights, and empowerment should not be accidental or simply an offshoot of a good education but rather an explicit, overarching goal in a healthy social environment.

Some major instruments of gender-fair education are

- affirmative action and quota systems, aggressive recruitment of female faculty and administrators, reform programs to remove bias from curricula and teaching materials, gender-sensitivity training for teachers and counselors, a review of policies and procedures for possible gender bias, and active recruitment of women into nontraditional fields of study;
- identification and projection of role models among faculty, administrators, and alumnae; systematic inclusion of women among speakers and resource persons;
- gender studies programs that are platforms for awareness generation in addition to offering courses that involve research, design and conduct training programs and establish links with women's nongovernmental organizations and activists for women's empowerment;
- The challenge of gender-fair women's Higher Education should be the transformation of women's lives as well as the transformation of society itself.

5.3 Impact of Higher Education in India: The Road to Comprehensive Development

The focused goal of Indian Higher Education is to acquire, generate, supplement and transmit knowledge that builds up leadership qualities. It has already to some extent empowered women to compete better, perform with precision and efficiency and achieve excellence in multi-tasking. Empowered women challenge men in their workplace and are visible in all forms of powerful corporate positions. Politically and economically women are now in a more commanding situation than fifty years ago. Indian women have made their presence felt in industry, technology, literature, art, banking, insurance and pharmaceutical centers. Educated women are also there in international business and administrative roles. Women's instinctive approach, which encompasses humane concerns, finds its reflection in their ability to combine justice with compassion, concern with rationality. Our vision of a better India free from multiple maladies can only be achieved when educated empowered women take up the mantle of responsibility and commit themselves to restructuring and advancing the development of India.

6. Conclusion

Higher Education of women plays a crucial role in releasing their energy and creativity and enabling them to meet the complex challenges of the present world. In acknowledging them as potential human resources, investment must be made in developing their capacity in terms of education, skill development, and technology transfers through technical training. Special emphasis needs to be given to Research and Development of appropriate scaled-down occupations engaging women in large proportions. Illiteracy and cultural barriers need to be removed without any further delay. For women to make personal strides forward, a synergy of effort, concentration, planning and cohesive functioning at the Higher Education level will create possibilities of a different future. By extending women's visibility and their self-sustaining ability, Higher Education must train them to become leaders with decision-making capacities to achieve the best for themselves and the country.

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