

Gender Disparity in Higher Education: A Critical Appraisal

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ABSTRACT

Status of a person or group in any society is an area of deep concern across the limitation of class, caste and gender divisions. Many researchers have tried to find out the condition of women especially and the level of their participation in different spheres of social life. In a developing country like India where half of the population is female, women play an important role in country's development and their participation in different spheres of life becomes a key to their empowerment. When the need for women empowerment was felt, the first and foremost means adopted was enhancing their participation in different spheres of society. One such important area is visibility and performance of an individual in higher education. In this juncture, the present paper explores and makes a critical appraisal of the existing gender disparity in the area of higher education. More specifically, this paper focuses on the case of gender disparity in higher education of Manipur, Northeast India.

1. Introduction

Globally, education can be a powerful instrument for reshaping and modernizing the society by giving equal opportunities to all humankind. However, our social history has witnessed unequal access to education from one person to another across the world. Comparing to men, women in higher education found to be lesser in number. Historically, one of the initial steps was to give the right to education to women so to make them literate followed by increasing the enrolment of women in higher education. However, as of now, the debate has shifted to equality and equity of women in higher educational institutions. Even though some research findings have shown positive changes and high educational mobility of women, majority of them are still in subordinate positions as compared to their male counterparts. Cause of such gender disparity in higher education in India may be manifold but the primary reason is the shortage of gender dimension in areas of higher education. In order to re-examine these situations, the following objectives were formulated to highlight the present scenario of higher education in relation to gender dimensions.

2. Objectives of the research paper

Firstly, the present paper explores the existing literatures on gender disparity in the area of higher education in India in general from a critical point of view. Lastly, this paper focuses more specifically on the case of gender disparity in higher education of Manipur, Northeast India and does a critical appraisal of the ground realities. The following section shows the findings from the existing literatures on the relation between gender and education along with the experiences from the state, Manipur.

3. Gender dimensions in area of Higher Education: A Review

Much has been researched on the relationship between education quality and gender equality from different perspectives. To mention a few points out of many gender dimensions in various areas of higher education that need to be addressed, following areas can be cited.

Besides changes in the formal or informal education in India in early, medieval, and the British period, post-independent India has shown revolutionary changes in overall development of education system. However, education system in India is not free from its criticism due to failures in education-centric policies, programmes and its implementation from time to time. In developed countries also, gender disparities are highest at the tertiary level as young men typically pursue college education before the women in their cohort do. Gender disparities in expenditures are greater than those in enrollments, because college education is more expensive than elementary or secondary schooling (Jacobs 1996: 157). Aikman *et. al.* (2011) explored the needs to re-conceptualize gender equality in education quality by analyzing gender-biased nature of schooling between boys and girls even though they performed and achieved equally in all school activities. Therefore, class and gender divisions among the social groups at educational institutes were clearly observed in some western countries.

Prakash (2007) studied the trends in growth and financing of higher education in India and found some major challenges like privatization, high fees structure, internationalization of higher education, etc. Despite having large number of educational institutes in the country, the access to higher and technical education among weaker sections of the society including women are still abysmally low. Thus, the Indian education system needs to give due consideration on equity among all sections of society through revision of the existing systems. Likewise, many scholars (Tilak 2012, Boite 2009, among others) have critically analyzed the declining budgetary allocation and its sudden and significant impacts on education sector. Some other researchers (Ladusingh 2006, Husain 2011, Bose 2012, Lilee 2017, etc) exposed regional variations in gender disparity and discrimination in education. Moreover, the stresses of dual family and professional roles management, career interruptions due to primacy given to their traditional gender roles, absence of adequate policies and legislation to ensure adequate participation of women, etc. are still acting as persisting impediments to women's professional growth in

higher educational institutions. Disproportionate representation of women in top level leadership is still not entirely based on the level of women's educational and employment status and the decision making power of a few women in top positions of higher educational institutions is still curtailed by male chauvinistic world. Therefore, addressing the issue of women empowerment must be multi dimensional and context bound which considers the local or regional social institutions and practices. In addition to these empirical researches from multi-disciplinary perspectives, some official surveys like All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE, 2013-14, 2015-16, 2017-18, etc.), University Grant Commission's (UGC, 2013), 'Saksham', etc. highlighted gender gap in higher educational institutes in India. Despite many efforts to bring gender equality in education, their measures failed to ensure the safety of women and the programmes for gender sensitisation on educational campuses are yet to fully implemented. Career growth and performance of women is dependent on both personal factors and shortcomings or advancement in policy levels. Here lies the importance of promoting the required gender dimensions in various areas of higher education that need to be addressed.

4. Gender disparity in Manipur, North East India

Disparity simply refers to differences in the outcome under consideration (such as wages, mortality rates, educational attainments, or any such indicator). Such disparities may be caused by differences in socio-cultural forces and economic interdependence of these characteristics. For example, the inferior outcome of a woman in terms of her work productivity may be a consequence of deliberately unfair treatment from the family or society. This is referred to as discrimination – the practice of treating members of a group less fairly than others, simply because the person(s) belong to a particular race, social class, religion or gender (Lilee, M. and Devi, S. 2013: 295-296). There are many reasons for existing gender disparities in any society, Ladusingh, et.al. (2006) revealed that one such major factor could be there is moderate son preference invariant of residence and socio-economic background, but not at the cost of balance sex composition of a boy and a girl. Not all women are satisfied with 'only daughters', though 'only sons' in the family is acceptable. Son preference is stronger among illiterate and non-working women and women above 30 years of age. Similarly, Birendra (2008) observed the natural balance of having equal number of population as men and women is rarely maintained due to many factors such as migration, war, employment, difference in mortality and fertility conditions, social preference of a child of a particular sex, etc. It is evident from the sex ratio of the total population that leads in negative balance of the female population in all the censuses since 1901. Though the reports of last six years of AISHE had shown the increasing Gross Enrolment Rate in higher education in all-India level, Manipur remained almost same with an average of 29.3 per cent to 30.0 per cent. Chandigarh holds the highest rank with an average of 67.8 per cent to 68.8 per cent respectively. In most of the states, gradually numbers of educational institutes were increasing along with the number of faculty members from one academic session to another. But, in case of Manipur, numbers of Universities are decreasing as per reports of AISHE 2016-17 and 2017-18. Say, in Seventh Report on AISHE (2016-17: 51) there were six universities in

the State out of total 11 types of Universities in India, they are - two Central Universities, two Institutes of National Importance, one State Public University and one State Private University. Whereas, State Private University is not enlisted in the 8th Report on AISHE (2017-18:43) and therefore there are only five universities in the State. But, some new universities were established in Manipur in the last two years though they were in infant stage.

On top of analyzing the gender dimensions in higher education of Manipur in general, the present paper explores women's participation as faculty members in all its six 'Schools of Studies' in Manipur University, one of the oldest universities in northeast India. Analysis of the gender dimension in Manipur University clearly reflected a huge gender gap in the number of male and female faculty members which holds true for all the disciplines. Even at all-India level, in the last decade number of female faculty witnessed an increase as there were 68 female teachers per 100 male teachers during the academic year 2016-2017. Among the various levels of posts, majority of teachers are in the level of Assistant Professor. In case of Manipur University also, male teachers outnumber female teachers in almost all departments. In other words, one third of the teaching faculties are female teachers (Manipur University Annual Report, 2016-17). Analysis also shows that involvement or selection of female faculties in the higher educational institutes is recent trend in almost all Colleges or Universities. The overall gender gap in respective disciplines reiterated the fact that despite various plans and policies of the Government of India to improve women's status in educational sectors, professional growth of female employees in higher education is still unsatisfactory and there is still disproportionate representation of women at the top-level positions. Even after a couple of years of improvement, the percentage of women faculty members in almost all departments of Manipur University is still less as compared to their male counterparts. The scenario is even worse if we consider the key positions. Given all these, it seems that there is a need to review appointment and promotion procedures, and provision of legislative and infra-structural support for women may serve for the welfare of the minority gender. For example, this university is yet to have a fully functional separate cell or committee against sexual harassment of women in the workplace. This is nothing but lack of seriousness in part of the authority to implement legislations dealing with gender issues. If we search for solutions, in certain contexts and instances, affirmative action to favour women may be considered as a desirable but short-term means of moving towards full gender equity in higher education. Steps should be taken up to ensure adequate representation of women in the decision-making bodies of the institution. Now, as many women are now holding the required qualifications and experiences, key posts in the University should be filled up by men and women on an equal basis and target should be made to increase their appointments until the 50 per cent figure is reached.

5. Concluding Remarks

Women in higher education institutions must take up the bigger responsibility of strengthening the position of women in this sector by contributing towards policy implementations as leading stakeholders of positive changes. In addition to the lack

of representative representation of women in the university administration, lack of women-centric facilities and insufficient implementation of policy in the administrative level forced the working women to face some critical challenges. The near absence of a gender dimension in the higher education curriculum of the state is the main area of concern in the context of Manipur. Therefore, there is a serious need for mainstreaming of gender issues in higher education. Gender sensitivity in university administration and corresponding adequate infrastructures should be installed for the larger benefit of the women community. For example, Manipur University is still yet to address the issue of lack of adequate support system/ services to ease the multiple burden of working mothers. Manipur University does not have a day care/ kids care centre inside the campus for the newly born wards of the young women employees and it will definitely have ill effects on their level of participation as well as performance. In

this backdrop, the need of the hour is to promote the gender dimension in important areas of higher education. So that someday all Indian universities including Manipur University may be able to develop themselves as recognizable centers of knowledge production at international level. To conclude this paper, some research questions for future research can be suggested. What aspects of education exhibit the most pronounced gender disparities? Does women's education interface with gender inequality in workplace or family? Has the expansion of education for women stimulated changes in other arenas, or has the educational system merely reflected developments in the rest of the society? To answer these questions, there is need for more empirical research and critical evaluation in near future from multi-disciplinary perspectives for the gender-just and holistically developed universities in India.

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