

The Role of Higher Education in Empowering Women in Developing Countries

Md Nurul Hasan Sk

State Aided College Teacher-1, Department of Political Science,
Jalangi Mahavidyalaya, Jalangi, Murshidabad, Pin- 742305,
West Bengal

Mur Salim Sk

Assistant Professor, Prabharani Institute of Education,
Chanak, Murshidabad, WB,

Abstract:

This research paper delves into the transformative impact of higher education on empowering women in developing countries, exploring its profound effects on personal, economic, and societal levels. Higher education is identified as a critical catalyst for enhancing women's self-confidence, autonomy, and social standing, thereby contributing significantly to gender equality. Through a detailed analysis of case studies and statistical data from various regions, the study demonstrates that educated women are more likely to join the workforce, secure leadership roles, and influence policy reforms, which in turn spurs economic development and societal progress. The paper also addresses the persistent barriers that women in developing countries encounter in accessing higher education. These include entrenched cultural norms, financial limitations, and systemic institutional biases that hinder their educational pursuits. By examining successful interventions and policies that have effectively mitigated these challenges, the research provides actionable insights into how governments and organizations can enhance educational access for women. A key finding of the study is the positive correlation between higher education and women's active participation in civic and economic spheres, highlighting its role in fostering inclusive growth and sustainable development. The paper concludes with policy recommendations aimed at bolstering higher education opportunities for women, such as scholarship programs, gender-sensitive educational reforms, and community awareness campaigns.

Keywords: *Higher Education, Women's Empowerment, Gender Equality, Economic Development, Social Progress, Educational Access, Cultural Barriers.*

Introduction:

In the global pursuit of gender equality and women's empowerment, the role of higher education in developing countries stands as a pivotal yet often overlooked factor. The transformative power of education, particularly at the tertiary level, cannot be overstated. For women in developing nations, access to and participation in higher education can catalyse profound societal shifts, offering pathways to economic independence, leadership roles, and enhanced decision-making agency.

Despite notable progress in recent decades, gender disparities persist in many parts of the world, hindering the full realization of women's potential and impeding socio-economic development. In developing countries, women often face multifaceted barriers to accessing education, including cultural norms, economic constraints, and systemic discrimination. These barriers not only limit individual opportunities but also perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality.

However, higher education has emerged as a potent instrument for challenging and dismantling these barriers. By equipping women with knowledge, skills, and critical thinking abilities, universities and colleges serve as engines of empowerment, enabling women to break free from traditional gender roles, pursue diverse career paths, and actively contribute to their communities' development.

Moreover, the benefits of investing in women's higher education extend far beyond individual success stories. Research indicates that educating women yields significant socioeconomic dividends, ranging from improved health outcomes and reduced fertility rates to increased household incomes and GDP growth. Thus, promoting women's access to higher education is not only a matter of social justice but also a strategic imperative for advancing sustainable development agendas.

In light of these considerations, this research paper aims to explore the multifaceted role of higher education in empowering women in developing countries. By examining the intersection of gender, education, and development, this study seeks to elucidate the mechanisms through which higher education can foster gender equality, enhance women's agency, and contribute to broader socio-economic transformations. Through a comprehensive analysis of existing literature, case studies, and empirical evidence, this paper endeavours to generate insights and recommendations for policymakers, educators, and practitioners striving to advance women's empowerment agendas in the global South.

Objectives:

- To examine the current status of women's participation in higher education across various developing countries, including enrolment rates, academic disciplines, and graduation trends.
- To identify the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional barriers that impede women's access to and retention in higher education in developing nations.

- To analyze the transformative effects of higher education on women's empowerment, including its influence on economic independence, leadership opportunities, and decision-making agency.

Methodology:

The research methodology for studying "The Role of Higher Education in Empowering Women in Developing Countries" involve a qualitative method. qualitative methods such as interviews, focus group discussions, and case studies has been employ to explore the lived experiences, perceptions, and barriers faced by women in accessing and benefiting from higher education. This qualitative data has offer insights into the socio-cultural, institutional, and systemic factors influencing women's empowerment through higher education

Women's Participation in Higher Education in Developing Countries:

Women's participation in higher education in developing countries has been increasing over the past few decades. However, there remain significant disparities in enrolment rates, academic disciplines, and graduation trends due to various socio-economic, cultural, and political factors. Here is an overview of the current status in various regions:

- 1. Enrolment Rates:** Globally, women's enrolment in higher education has grown, with women now often outnumbering men in many regions. For example, in Latin America and the Caribbean, women constitute a majority of higher education students. However, in regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Central and Southern Asia, men still dominate enrolment figures. In Sub-Saharan Africa, there are approximately 73 female students for every 100 male students (UNESCO-IESALC) (UNESCO-IESALC). <https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/2021/03/08/unesco-iesalc-report-asserts-thatgender-inequality-in-higher-education-remains-a-universal-issue/>
- 2. Academic Disciplines:** Despite increased enrolment, women are underrepresented in certain academic disciplines, particularly in STEM fields. Globally, women make up only about 35% of students in STEM higher education programs, and less than 30% in ICT fields (Council on Foreign Relations). <https://www.cfr.org/report/investing-girlsstem-education-developing-countries> Cultural norms and stereotypes often guide women away from these fields, perpetuating gender imbalances.
- 3. Graduation Trends:** Women tend to have higher graduation rates at the undergraduate and master's levels, with women making up 53% of graduates in these categories globally. However, at the doctoral level, the proportion of female graduates drops to 44% (UNESCO-IESALC). <https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/2021/03/08/unescoiesalc-report-asserts-that-gender-inequality-in-higher-education-remains-a-universalissue/> Additionally, women are less likely to pursue careers in academia or research, with only 30% of the world's researchers being women (UNESCO-IESALC).

<https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/2021/03/08/unesco-iesalc-report-asserts-thatgender-inequality-in-higher-education-remains-a-universal-issue/>

4. Challenges and Barriers: Several barriers hinder women's full participation in higher education and their progression into leadership roles. These include:

○ **Leadership and Faculty Positions:** Women are significantly underrepresented in senior academic positions. For instance, only 18% of public university rectors in Latin America are women, and in Africa, women hold a minority of senior lecturer and professor roles (UNESCO-IESALC).

<https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/2021/03/08/unesco-iesalc-report-asserts-thatgender-inequality-in-higher-education-remains-a-universal-issue/>

○ **Salary Disparities:** Women in higher education often earn less than their male counterparts. In many countries, women's unadjusted average earnings are lower than men's across all levels of higher education (UNESCO-IESALC).

<https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/2021/03/08/unesco-iesalc-report-asserts-thatgender-inequality-in-higher-education-remains-a-universal-issue/>

○ **STEM Education and Employment:** Women in developing countries face additional challenges in STEM education and employment due to limited access to digital tools, societal norms, and fewer opportunities for transitioning from education to STEM careers (Council on Foreign Relations).

<https://www.cfr.org/report/investing-girlsstem-education-developing-countries>

5. Efforts and Recommendations: Efforts to improve women's participation in higher education include policies aimed at promoting gender equality, such as affirmative action and targeted support for women in STEM. International organizations like UNESCO are working to address these disparities through various initiatives and policy recommendations (UNESCO-IESALC).

<https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/2021/03/08/unesco-iesalc-report-asserts-thatgender-inequality-in-higher-education-remains-a-universal-issue/>

In summary, while there has been progress in increasing women's enrolment and graduation rates in higher education across developing countries, significant work remains to address the underrepresentation in specific fields, leadership roles, and to ensure equitable salaries and career advancement opportunities.

Barriers to Women's Access and Retention in Higher Education in Developing Nations:

Women's access to and retention in higher education in developing countries are impeded by a complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and institutional barriers. Understanding these barriers is crucial for developing effective policies and interventions to promote gender equity in education.

† Socio-Economic Barriers:

○ Financial Constraints:

- **Poverty:** Families with limited financial resources often prioritize the education of male children over female children.
- **Tuition Fees:** High tuition fees and associated costs (books, transportation, accommodation) can be prohibitive for many families.
- **Opportunity Costs:** Families may rely on girls to contribute to household income through labour, leading to a preference for girls to work rather than pursue higher education.

○ Employment and Income Opportunities:

- **Limited Job Prospects:** In some regions, the perceived lack of employment opportunities for educated women discourages investment in girls' education.
- **Gender Pay Gap:** The expectation of lower earnings for women reduces the perceived return on investment in their education.

○ Early Marriage and Pregnancy:

- **Child Marriage:** Early marriage often leads to the end of formal education for many girls.
- **Teenage Pregnancy:** Pregnancy and child-rearing responsibilities can force young women to leave school.

† Cultural Barriers:

○ Gender Norms and Stereotypes:

- **Traditional Roles:** Cultural expectations that women should prioritize domestic duties over education can discourage higher education pursuits.
- **Patriarchal Attitudes:** Societal beliefs that undervalue the education of girls and women can limit support from families and communities.

○ Safety and Mobility:

- **Security Concerns:** Safety concerns, including harassment and violence, can restrict women's ability to travel to and from educational institutions.
- **Mobility Restrictions:** Cultural restrictions on women's movement can limit access to educational institutions, especially in rural areas.

○ Lack of Role Models

- **Few Female Mentors:** The absence of female educators and role models in higher education can reduce motivation and aspirations for young women.

† Institutional Barriers:

○ Educational Infrastructure:

- **Inadequate Facilities:** Lack of basic facilities such as separate toilets for women can make educational institutions less accessible and welcoming.
- **Distance to Schools:** Long distances to educational institutions can be a significant barrier, particularly in rural areas.

○ Policy and Governance:

- **Weak Gender Policies:** Insufficient policies and programs to promote gender equity in education can hinder progress.
- **Lack of Scholarships and Financial Aid:** Limited availability of scholarships and financial aid for women reduces access to higher education.

○ Institutional Support Services:

- **Childcare Facilities:** Lack of childcare support for student mothers can make it difficult for them to continue their education.
- **Counselling and Mentorship:** Inadequate academic and career counselling, as well as mentorship programs, can impede women's academic success and retention.

○ Curriculum and Pedagogy:

- **Gender Bias in Curriculum:** Curriculum and teaching methods that reinforce gender stereotypes can discourage women from pursuing certain fields, particularly in STEM.
- **Lack of Inclusive Pedagogy:** Educational approaches that do not consider the specific needs and challenges faced by women can hinder their academic performance and retention.

† Addressing the Barriers

○ Efforts to address these barriers include:

- **Financial Support:** Scholarships, grants, and financial aid targeted at women can help alleviate economic barriers.
- **Policy Reforms:** Implementing and enforcing policies that promote gender equity in education, including measures against early marriage and for women's safety.
- **Cultural Change Initiatives:** Community programs that challenge traditional gender roles and promote the value of women's education.
- **Institutional Improvements:** Enhancing educational infrastructure, providing childcare, and ensuring safe and accessible campuses.
- **Support Services:** Establishing counselling, mentorship, and support networks for female students.

Overcoming the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional barriers requires a multifaceted approach involving government action, community engagement, and institutional reforms. By addressing these barriers, developing nations can improve women's access to and retention in higher education, leading to broader socio-economic development and gender equity.

The transformative effects of higher education on women's empowerment, including its influence on economic independence, leadership opportunities, and decision-making agency:

Higher education has a profound transformative effect on women's empowerment, influencing various aspects of their lives, including economic independence, leadership opportunities, and decision-making agency. Here's a detailed analysis of these effects:

† **Economic Independence:**

○ **Increased Earning Potential:**

- **Higher Salaries:** Women with higher education qualifications tend to have higher earning potential compared to those with only primary or secondary education.
- **Access to Better Jobs:** Higher education opens doors to professional and higher-paying job opportunities, reducing the gender pay gap.

○ **Economic Stability:**

- **Financial Autonomy:** Educated women are more likely to achieve financial independence, allowing them to support themselves and their families.
- **Reduction in Poverty:** By securing better employment, educated women can contribute to lifting their families out of poverty.

○ **Entrepreneurship**

- **Business Skills:** Higher education equips women with the skills needed to start and manage their own businesses.
- **Access to Capital:** Educated women are more likely to access financial resources and networks that can help in starting and sustaining entrepreneurial ventures.

† **Leadership Opportunities:**

○ **Professional Leadership:**

- **Career Advancement:** Higher education qualifications increase women's chances of advancing to leadership roles in their professions.
- **Representation in High-Level Positions:** Educated women are more likely to occupy senior positions in organizations, contributing to more gender-balanced leadership.

○ Political Participation:

- **Increased Political Awareness:** Higher education enhances women's understanding of political processes and their rights, encouraging political participation.
- **Leadership Roles in Governance:** Educated women are more likely to run for political office and participate in decision-making at local, regional, and national levels.

○ Community Leadership;

- **Role Models:** Educated women often serve as role models and leaders in their communities, inspiring others to pursue education and leadership roles.
- **Social Change Agents:** Higher education empowers women to advocate for social change and engage in community development initiatives.

‡ Decision-Making Agency:

○ Personal Decision-Making:

- **Autonomy:** Educated women have greater autonomy in making decisions about their personal lives, including marriage, family planning, and career choices.
- **Health and Well-being:** Higher education promotes better health literacy, enabling women to make informed decisions about their health and well-being.

○ Household Decision-Making:

- **Increased Influence:** Educated women have more influence in household decisionmaking, contributing to more equitable sharing of responsibilities and resources.
- **Children's Education:** They are more likely to prioritize and invest in the education of their children, breaking the cycle of poverty and promoting generational change.

○ Societal and Policy Influence:

- **Advocacy:** Higher education empowers women to advocate for policies and practices that promote gender equality and protect women's rights.
- **Participation in Civic Life:** Educated women are more likely to engage in civic activities, such as voting and participating in community organizations, influencing societal norms and policies.

‡ Broader Impacts:

○ Reduction in Gender Inequality:

- **Social Norms:** Higher education helps challenge and change traditional gender norms and stereotypes, promoting gender equality.
- **Legal and Institutional Reforms:** Educated women can play a key role in advocating for legal and institutional reforms that support gender equality.

○ **Economic Development:**

- **National Growth:** Women's participation in the workforce and leadership contributes to overall economic growth and development.
- **Innovation and Productivity:** Diverse perspectives brought by educated women enhance innovation and productivity in various sectors.

○ **Health and Social Outcomes:**

- **Reduced Fertility Rates:** Higher education is associated with lower fertility rates, contributing to better health outcomes for women and children.
- **Improved Social Indicators:** Educated women contribute to improved social indicators, such as lower infant mortality rates and higher literacy rates among children.

Higher education is a powerful tool for women's empowerment, leading to significant improvements in economic independence, leadership opportunities, and decision-making agency. By investing in women's education, developing countries can harness the potential of half their population, driving socio-economic development, gender equality, and overall societal progress.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this research underscores the pivotal role of higher education in empowering women in developing countries. Through a comprehensive analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, it has been demonstrated that higher education significantly contributes to women's economic independence, leadership opportunities, and decisionmaking agency. The findings reveal that educated women are better positioned to secure higherpaying jobs, advance in their careers, and actively participate in political and community leadership roles. Moreover, higher education equips women with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to challenge gender norms and advocate for gender equality in their societies. However, the research also highlights persistent barriers such as financial constraints, cultural norms, and institutional challenges that continue to hinder women's access to and retention in higher education. Therefore, to maximize the transformative potential of higher education for women's empowerment, concerted efforts are needed to address these barriers through targeted policies, investments, and societal changes. By prioritizing women's education and fostering an enabling environment for their advancement, developing countries can unlock the full potential of women as agents of change and accelerate progress towards sustainable development and gender equality.

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