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## Higher Education Concerns of Underprivileged Girl Students in India – An Overview

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Aruna Ganjikunta<sup>1\*</sup>, Tejaswani Kadavakollu<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1\*,2</sup>Department of Mathematics, Department of English, GITAM University, Hyderabad, India

Email: <sup>2</sup>tkadavak@gitam.edu

Corresponding Email: <sup>1\*</sup>aganjiku@gitam.edu

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**Abstract:** *The rate of women in higher education is higher in developed countries when compared to India. The state of affairs in the developed countries prove that women empowerment is proportionate to the progress of a country. India is a developing country so concentrating on women's education and women empowerment in the long run would help India boost its economy. Girl students belonging to low-income group should overcome numerous barriers to pursue higher education. The paper focuses on the barriers faced by women belonging to low income group families. Various issues and challenges faced by women belonging to low economic group to pursue research and development in education would be discussed in this article. Recommendations to overcome barriers would also be suggested in this article.*

**Keywords:** *Empowerment of Women, Underprivileged Girl Students, Women Education, Holistic Development, Women and Nation.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Ancient Indian stories are adorned with highly intelligent women such as prophetess Gargi, philosophers Ghosha, Lopamudra, mathematician Lilavati, daughter of eminent mathematician, Bhaskaracharya; and writers Tallapaka Timmakka and Molla. Time and again, it has been proved that women excel in their chosen fields breaking the barriers. India has given women an honourable place among the deities, in religion and in sacred texts.

All the talks regarding honour for women and women emancipation have somehow been relegated to words only. When it comes to practice, either in cities where women survive on their intellect or in villages where women survive on their physical strength, women are given the short end of the stick. Charlotte Whitton's quote on women's capabilities is mentioned in the article, *The Rise of Saudi Women*, in the Deccan Chronicle, dated 12/03/05 by Lubna Hussain, a Saudi writer, "[w]hatever women do they must do twice as well as men in order to



be thought half as good. Luckily this is not difficult” [2005, 7]. This quote makes us understand how difficult it is for women to surmount obstacles that they face. Yet, it is proved that it is not impossible.

## **2. RATIONALE FOR THE PROPOSAL:**

It is widely accepted that harassment at home and outside, media, religion, society, economic constraints, and lack of knowledge are some of the barriers that can be identified as impeding the progress of girl students in pursuing higher education. It is almost impossible for a girl who cannot even opt for higher studies to think about entering research and development. The topic is chosen as the authors of this article would like to address the issue at the ground level.

## **3. OBJECTIVE:**

The objective of the article is to identify the concerns faced by girls belonging to low-income group families in research and development of education sector. Also, the article would deliberate upon the measures to overcome these barriers. The article is expected to inspire women especially girl students from government schools to overcome hurdles and reach the pinnacle of education sphere.

It is common knowledge that mostly women from middle and higher economic strata have access to higher education. Women coming from lower economic group opting for higher education form a minute percentage. The present article attempts to investigate various aspects that deter a girl belonging to lower economic group from pursuing higher education.

## **4. METHODOLOGY:**

Due to the nature of the topic, the study would be mostly theoretical. The sources cited in this article are journal articles, government reports, research articles and research studies. The arguments presented in this article would be ably supported by evidence cited from authentic material. Apart from this, the authors met several girl students and parents of girl students coming from low economic groups to get acquainted with their concerns.

**Literature Survey:** Government reports and journal articles.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

### **5.1 Harassment:**

In recent times, harassment and crime against women and child increased. At times even homes have become as dangerous as streets, kith and kin more treacherous than total strangers.

In small towns and villages, it is difficult to find encouragement to educate a girl child. Parents are under tremendous pressure to get their child married due to conditions in the society. The responsibility of getting the child married lies heavily on their shoulder and they are unable to think beyond it. So, education takes a back seat. The girls are educated only up to a minimum level which is available in their hometown and are married off at a very early age. Eventually, lack of education leads to gender inequality, malnutrition among women and children, and domestic violence (Sethuraman and Lansdown, 2006).



Another reason not to educate a girl child is unwarranted attention from boys. For the past few years, newspapers are filled with atrocities against girls in the name of love. Parents fear to send their girls to places where they are easily accessible.

Indian legislation came up with several laws to protect women against atrocities, violence and gender discrimination. In the recent times, Indian Government has been using Domestic Violence Act, Nirbhaya Act and POSCO Act productively to curb crime against women. Unfortunately, law takes time to sentence whereas in the meantime crime strikes again and again. Lack of awareness and illiteracy are the reasons for the inability of people residing in villages and towns to utilize laws for their protection.

The status of women in India has been analysed by committees appointed by the Indian government such as "Towards Equality" 1974, National Perspective Plan for Women, 1988 - 2000 and Shramshakthi Report 1988. Studies reveal that the reality is very far away from what is projected on papers (Women Empowerment, 21 - 27).

It should be noted that some parents make efforts only to control their girl children but no efforts are made to educate their male children. Some parents do not realize their responsibility in inculcating good behaviour in their sons. Once a boy is born, he is taken for granted and no control measures or corrective measures are applied on him.

To bring about a change in society, it is necessary to teach boys how to behave in a civil society before attempting to control girls. The onus therefore lies not on the parents of girls but mainly on the parents of boys whose responsibility is to see that their sons get education. Urvashi Sahni, in her report, *What about our Boys, Educating Boys for Gender Justice*, emphasises the fact that "boys always enjoy a preferred status over their female counterparts." She further tells that "Boys must also learn how to deconstruct a patriarchal conception of masculinity and reconstruct an egalitarian one in its place." Sahni feels that school is the best place to mould the beliefs related to masculinity and gender (5).

It is imperative to teach boys to overcome patriarchal prejudices and treat women equally and engage them in activities that are beneficial to the society.

## **5.2 Media:**

India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru once quoted that a nation's status can be told by the status of the women of that nation. India is a country where women are venerated in the form of goddesses. But when it comes to reality, the scenario is otherwise. Laws must be constituted to protect women. In spite of constituting and implementing the laws which is a time-consuming process, the status of women in India is an endangered state.

Media has a very powerful presence in Indian households. Even low-income group families invest in television and internet for entertainment purpose. With internet becoming widely available at a very small sum and the advent of smart phones which cater to all needs, from entertainment to education, media made an entry into the common man's life as well.

Measures should be taken to restrain news reports which have a negative impact on women's empowerment. News channels generally sensationalize news to boost their viewership and Television Rating Point, TRP ratings. Especially, when it comes to women and child victims,



time and again, it is seen that the news channels focus on the victims rather than the perpetrators. This sensationalized news telecasts demotivate parents of girl students and girl students to pursue higher studies as in some cases they have to travel far for further studies. News when focused on perpetrators' background and their tendency to commit crimes, may help society understand the paths that lead to crimes and control them. News, many times is dramatically overblown rather than being informative and instructive.

Knowingly or unknowingly media is helping in reducing the number of girl students belonging to low-income group families who are opting for higher education. Media sensationalizes a crime for the sake of TRP or to increase the sales of newspapers. Media should follow journalism ethics when reporting news items. Keeping the destructive havoc that media can create in the minds of the gullible, news should be telecasted in a responsible manner. Incorrect news propagation and erroneous focus on the victim which is against journalism ethics cause parents to fear for their daughters more whereas news reports if focused on perpetrators will help parents put in efforts to mould their sons. If the perpetrators and their situations are focused rather than the victim, the common man will be able to understand where the problem lies and will try to apply remedial measures to correct the problem.

### **5.3 Religion:**

Religious mores and societal conventions are very strict in small towns and villages. People are expected to follow the general trend. Those who follow a different trail are scrutinized and commented upon. If they are successful, they lead as an example, in case they fail, they become a case in point to stress upon traditions.

Religion at times empowered women and at times disempowered women. He clarifies that the power lies with the persons who interpret religious texts. Many a time, misinterpretations are made and people stay silent as they do not want to antagonize people identifying with religion. Interpretations are generally made to suit the people in power, in this case, the men. It is seen that many times interpretations are made in such a way that women are ignored, suppressed and controlled.

Low economic groups families give more importance to religion and society and are generally weary of deviating from the herd mentality. So, they end up following their predecessors rather than changing according to needs and times. It is almost impossible for many of them to think of providing education for their girl children. In certain cultures, infanticide is practised if a female child is born or if the result is known as female based on gender determination tests. Girl children are seen as a disgrace to the family lineage and a burden to nurture as expenses mount in the form of education and marriage expenses. Some parents reason that raising a daughter is waste of money as after all the expenses the family incurs a girl has to marry and become the property of another family.

This attitude towards a girl works against their progress in life and the families get stuck in the same rut forever. Hence, it is understood that religion has little role in helping girl children to progress in life or empower them.

### **5.4 Society:**

Parents from low economic background who are interested in providing higher education to their girl children require a lot of courage to go against the society they live in. Security,



decision making power, economic independence and mobility for girls and women are negligible in rural India.

Women and girl children have little access to health, education or entertainment in low economic groups. They endure a double disadvantage due to their gender and class. Very rarely do we come across girl children who have access to higher education and choose to study. Only chance circumstances help them pursue higher studies.

The authors of the present article believe that a forum created to promote education among the girl students belonging to low economic group families can empower the girls and lead to the development of the country.

### **5.5 Economic constraints:**

Economic constraints are another reason that impedes the progress of education of a girl child. Some parents who come under low-income category do not give much importance to long term education. Performing the wedding of a girl child according to traditions is more important than providing higher education to progress in life.

Some low-income group families travel to different places in search of work and livelihood and in the process the education of the children suffers. Admission in welfare hostels is another option for these families but the conditions of these hostels for the promotion of education are also questionable. It is unfair to assume that a girl child who constantly undergoes trauma from every direction can surmount all the barriers that lay ahead of her and engage in higher studies. This is where the stakeholders of the education system in India have to step in and take responsibility.

No doubt, there are women in higher education sector pursuing research and development but they come from higher income bracket. If girls, irrespective of their economic groups, can achieve higher studies it will result in the development of our nation. The responsibility lies on the government and Universities/educational centres to reach out to these girls.

### **5.6 Lack of knowledge:**

The major problem that obstructs women education among low income group families is lack of awareness regarding various opportunities that are available in higher education sector. Most of them are not aware of higher education opportunities and the development that it brings to their lives. They are also not aware of the scholarship schemes at higher education level. Government and Higher Education Centres should take an initiative to inform them about these programs as women empowerment will directly lead to the development of the nation. The proceedings of seminars and conferences such as these should reach the target audience rather than limit to the Universities.

Central and State Universities offer higher education at less expense for bright students. Also scholarships and reservations need to be utilized to the full extent. Private Universities offer quality education on par with Central and State Universities but at a higher cost which would probably be beyond the scope of a girl student coming from an underprivileged family. Moreover, concerns related to harassment at various levels exist which dampen the spirits of a girl student. Personal issues also could impede the progress of a girl student. Constraints related to home and society also are causative factors.





The major problem faced by women is lack of awareness regarding various options in higher education field. Although, Universities try to initiate dialogue on higher education, those deliberations remain within the Universities or colleges. How do we reach the girls/women who are unaware of the diverse options that education field contains? How do we educate the girls from Government High Schools about the magnificent vistas that education has to offer? The entire proceedings of these seminars and conferences need to reach the girl students. It is imperative to bring to their notice the numerous options in education at a young age so that they can associate and focus on their goals.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Women belonging to middle class and higher economic groups are aware of the benefits of education and a considerable number of women are pursuing higher education and research from this class. Whereas women from lower economic group are unaware of the opportunities that are available for them. If the awareness becomes extensive, obviously chances exist for the increase in percentage of women pursuing research in India.

Apart from that, several barriers that women encounter in pursuing education as discussed above impact their aspirations to reach their goals. Also, girl students and their parents are unaware of the various scholarship schemes that are available to pursue higher education. Moreover, the girl students rarely receive guidance regarding higher education. In some instances, it was seen that the teachers who teach them are also not aware of the scholarship schemes that are available to pursue higher education. Also, the teachers are burdened with factors such as monitoring the dropouts and other related issues. In most cases, the parents of these girl students are uneducated and performing unskilled labor jobs. For these parents, earning a livelihood so as to provide for the family is an everyday struggle. They are unable to think ahead and plan for the future of their girl children. Keeping these issues in view, the authors have come up with some recommendations which would probably help the girl students to pursue higher education. The authors strongly believe that being born in a low income group family should not be a hindrance for girls to pursue their goals.

### **Recommendations:**

The deliberations of conferences/seminars held at University/college level should reach girls/women at all levels in spite of their educational accomplishments. The following methods may be employed for that purpose:

- Gram Panchayats, anganwadis, government schools, government hospitals, village fairs and such other public places in villages/towns where girl students have access should be utilized to the maximum.
- A forum may be created at the district level to propagate the conference proceedings and publicize higher education opportunities.
- A teaching assistantship at village level schools for a short period may be made mandatory for PG students near their home.
- Spreading awareness regarding higher studies and research may be made part of the course work conducted for the research scholars.
- Barriers do exist but it is observed that many women cross these barriers and make a mark not only in education but in other chosen fields as well. A little help from the government



and the Universities will help the girls from low economic group families take up research and development leading to an increase in the percentage of women in higher education.

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