Missing voices in higher education – Need for inclusive policies

1 Dr.Girija K.S., 2 Dr. Basavaraja G

1Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University College of Arts
Tumkur University, Tumakuru 572103
2 Professor and Chairman, Department of Studies and Research in
Political Science, Tumkur University, Tumakuru 572103

Abstract:

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world" –
Nelson Mandela

At a time when more and more women are entering into education and employment and are equal participants in the eradication of social and gender inequalities, we still see the barriers surrounding them at each level be it professional, personal, research and in higher centers of learning as the highly qualified women also accept the inevitable situations as 'normal'. They are also denied of higher opportunities and positions due to their gender which can have a lasting effect on their carrier. In Karnataka for example, out of the 28 state universities, we have only one women's university and a Vice chancellor. If this is the condition of educated, qualified women, one can imagine the condition of women in post-graduation, research and other areas of higher learning. Why do we see less women? Where do they disappear? Or what roles are they expected to play in the society? Since our society has deep rooted patriarchy at all levels, higher education is no exception and hence men are preferred over women (since they will have to play multiple roles both at home and at workplace) since the complexities and changes in gendered division of labour are rampant. Gender stereotypes have given women a second place or they tend to be missing in the mainstream, their voices unheard most of times and have been hidden in the narratives of history. The discriminatory practices and lack of spaces have often left women and girl children at the mercy of patriarchal ideals. This paper would like to draw upon such varied issues in higher education from a feminist and gender lens. It is a theoretical paper based on secondary data.

Key Words: Education, feminist, gender inequalities, higher centers of learning, stereotypes

Introduction:

"Each time a woman stands up for herself, without possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women" – Maya Angelou

Mary Wollestonecraft, the 18th century philosopher and an advocate of women's rights believed that "society as a whole would be greatly benefitted if women receive equal treatment and respect. She was one of the pioneer's of "rights" both for men and women. However centuries has passed since this declaration has been made and yes of course, we have travelled a distance that our forefathers couldn't imagine. However, when we look into the present situation, can we really say that the society is 'gender just' and equitable in nature specifically when we speak of higher centre's of learning, how many women do we see in higher positions, despite they having all the required qualifications? We shall try to look into the possibilities in this paper.

Gender based discrimination in education is both a cause and a consequence of deep rooted disparities in society. Poverty, ethnic background, traditional attitudes and the role of women and girls in the social structure have all undermined her ability in getting equal access to education and in exercising her lawful rights. Girls getting married at a very young age have led to drastic drop out particularly during the two years of pandemic.

Objective:

The objective of this paper is to:

- ❖ acknowledge the gender role in higher education
- ❖ analyse how patriarchy has been deep rooted in society as well in higher institutions of learning
- ❖ to know why women themselves refrain from taking up positions in higher education

Methodology:

The method that is used is quantitative and is descriptive in nature. It also is based on feminist research methods which mean to understand the problems from a feminist standpoint to seek answers to overcome the biases in research and bring about a change.

Women make progress in Higher Education but gender imbalance is still evident:

Various factors play a vital role in deciding the higher education that has to be provided to women and in a country like ours where there is unequal development and constraints in socio-economic and cultural journey, they rarely have the opportunity to persue their dreams.

At a time when we are celebrating women's day and the theme of this year is ***#Embrace Equity – DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality***", technology change and education have become pertinent in achieving gender equality and empowerment of all women, the higher education sector seem to have witnessed a small change when it comes to female participation. Even though the share of female students is lowest in the institutes of national importance there has been an overall increase in female enrolment.

Interestingly there has been an increase in their enrolment in the last few decades. Increased equity and access to education, enhanced income potential, the international thrust to narrow down the gender gaps have all contributed to this change. (India Today). According to the Press Information Bureau (PIB, GOI), the Ministry of Education, GOI has released All India Survey on Higher Education, AISHE 2020-2021 covering all educational Institutions in the country. As per this information, the female enrolment has increased to 2.01 crore from 1.88 crore in 2019-20 and there has been an increase of around 44 lakh (28%) since 2014-15. Similarly the percentage of female enrolment to total enrolment has increased from 45% in 2014-15 to 49% in 2020-21. i.e. across courses, women formed 49% of college enrolments in 2020. The All India Survey revealed that apart from more females being enrolled in M.Phil, Ph.D courses, they continue to dominate the medical sciences, B.A. & B.Sc programs whereas in professional and in STEM, their enrolment is

significantly lower. In the IIT's the ratio of female students 2017 was less than 10 percent which is less than the national average and the ratio of women enrolled in the top three IMMs is less than a third of total admissions. Another important aspect that the survey mentions is that in social sciences and humanities, the enrolment of female students is higher than compared to science streams.
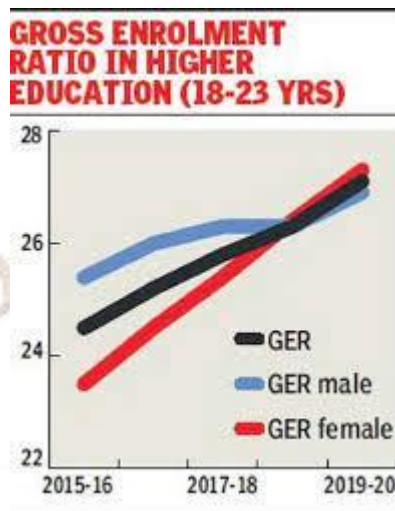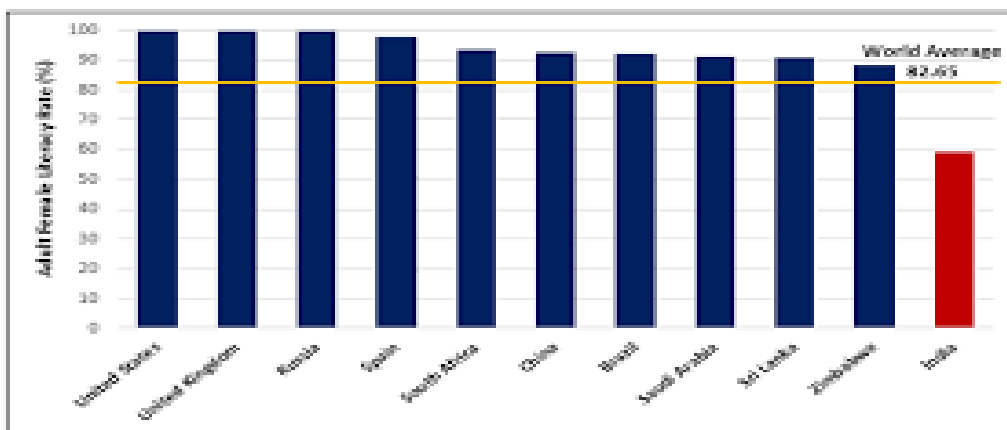

Fig 1 gross enrolment ratio

While these statistics attribute to the increased number of female students in higher educational institutions, when it comes to world average, it is far behind 22 percent points.

Female enrolment in higher education – world average

Fig 2 (firstpost.com)

However, the involvement of women in higher education comes to an end once a girl completes her graduation and the drop out levels at this stage is 84% when compared to boys. Where are they? Why are they missing? Various factors are attributed to this and one main reason is the institution of marriage wherein a girl is forced to enter this after her graduation. Many times the graduation certificates are considered as an acknowledgement for marriage which makes the females to enter higher institutions of learning difficult task as this notion of equality is dictated by culture, traditions and religion. The gender bias and stereotyping doesn't stop here but is carried through generations.

Challenges to women in higher positions in Indian educational Institutions:

Though education is considered as a pathway in achieving gender equality, the participation of women in higher positions in such institutions is rather negligible. As Amartya Sen, a pioneer of human development maintains that "if we continue to leave vast sections of the people outside the purview of education, we make the world not only less just, but also less secure". However, as we look into the situation we are not only astonished but also frustrated as the figures show a dismal position of women in higher positions in education. In terms of academic positions and research and other administrative positions we see lesser number of women.

Studies have shown that women in higher education leadership roles can create a long lasting impact on the future generation of females; they also at the same time contribute to greater diversity of thought, problem-solving and promote better decision-making in the interest of the organization. However, despite such positive traits and influence, we see women either not accepting higher positions or not been given the opportunity to establish her dynamism. "While acknowledging the gains made by women it is equally important to address the challenges women continue to confront – women hold the least senior administrative positions and are lowest paid too. The ethnic and racial minorities are the least preferred and women in academia are not just denied top leadership opportunities but rather opportunities seem to disappear:. (Cristina and Mangala Subramaniam, 2020) And even when women attain leadership position, they face challenges within the institution and perhaps the most important is the mindset which requires a transformational change.

Before writing this paper, a small survey was conducted to ascertain the reasons as to why women are fewer participants in higher educational centres and it was found that gender parity in leadership was one of the important matter that needed to be addressed. When women are denied of leadership they are also deprived of the agency through which they can make a difference in workplace and society as well. When women are in leadership position, they can also sensitize the institution and can have a positive influence on the future generations. Unfortunately, the stereotypes and biases that are subtly present can have negative impact on the programs and policies that are to be adopted in workplace.

Balance between workplace challenges and familial responsibilities are another important reason why women do not prefer to take up the responsibilities. The societal pressure and workplace duties contradict to a great extent and women are forced to opt the latter. However, if our institutions were more gender friendly and adoptable work environment, probably we could have seen more women in leadership positions.

Another major challenge which particularly women face is lack of co-operation from other male members and the survey shows that 72.7% agreed to the above point. Accepting women as their superior or leader itself is a problem to many male members and hence lack of co-operation in implementing certain programs becomes difficult. She is either branded or taken in a lighter way. This mindset definitely needs a change.

Few women in administrative leadership may not fit into the male styles and cliques and they become more isolated. People often judge their actions and words from a different perspective (male perspective) and hence are isolated from the decision-making capacity.

Change in mindset is imperative:

Perhaps the most important and crucial aspect that is essential today is the change in the mindset in our campuses to accept women leaders (though they are accepted in bureaucracy) As we move up the ladder, only few are visible at the top positions in major universities and in research. Their increased participation is not only a reflection of the social-economic and political status of a country but also include the gender aspect in it. In Karnataka, for example, out of the 28 state universities and many more private universities, we have only one women vice chancellor and in the rest of the positions, men occupy such lucrative positions which earns them name and fame. Hence, it is imperative that the institutional culture which is a broader extension of the society needs to be changed. "Just as higher education institutions have diversity and inclusive policies, they should reflect on some similar policies for women's full professional participation which would create a just and equitable atmosphere and encourage academic development of women. As Dr.Woohyang Chloe Sim has pointed out "women need to be influencing the agenda, if they want to overcome inequalities".

References:

1. Barriers to women's education in India – an overview www.collegemaker.com
2. Cristina Alcalde and Mangala Subramaniam Women in Leadership: Challenges and Recommendations, July 17 2020
3. IIM Raipur, Women make progress but higher education has gender discrimination,
4. Maria Eleena, Gender inequality in higher education persists, 12 March 2021, University world news
5. Ramesh Pokhriyal, Enhancing Gender equality in India's higher education, March 6 2020, Hindustan times
6. S Shephard, Why are there so few female leaders in higher education, Sage Journals, 2017