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Gender Equity in Higher Education: A Survey of Social Determinants among Rural Girls

Dr Tripta Parmar (Principal)

Sant Darara Singh College of Education for Women Lopon, Distt Moga

Email tripta_parmar@yahoo.co.in

Abstract

Access to higher education is an important factor in promoting gender equity and social development. However, rural girls often face multiple social barriers that limit their opportunities for pursuing higher education. The present study examines the social determinants affecting access to higher education among rural girls. Using a survey method, data were collected from rural female students through a structured questionnaire. The study focuses on key social determinants such as family support, socio-economic status, cultural norms, parental education and availability of educational resources. The findings indicate that socio-economic constraints, traditional gender roles, limited awareness about higher education opportunities and inadequate educational facilities significantly influence rural girls' participation in higher education. Family attitudes and community perceptions also play a crucial role in shaping educational aspirations and access. The study highlights the need for targeted policies and supportive interventions to reduce gender disparities and improve access to higher education for rural girls. Strengthening awareness, improving infrastructure and encouraging family and community support can contribute to greater gender equity in higher education. The results of the study may assist policymakers, educators and researchers in developing strategies to promote inclusive and equitable educational opportunities for rural girls

Keywords: Gender Equity, Higher Education, Rural Girls, Social Determinants, Educational Access, Gender Disparity

Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a powerful instrument for social transformation and empowerment. Access to higher education, in particular, plays a crucial role in enhancing individual capabilities, improving employment opportunities, and promoting social mobility. In recent years, the global emphasis on gender equity in education has increased, as reflected in initiatives such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which emphasize inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Despite these efforts, significant gender disparities continue to exist in access to higher education, especially among girls belonging to rural communities. Rural

girls often face multiple social and structural barriers that limit their participation in higher education. Factors such as socio-economic status, parental education, cultural norms, early marriage, and lack of educational infrastructure can significantly influence their educational aspirations and opportunities. In many rural settings, traditional gender roles prioritize domestic responsibilities for girls, which often results in limited support for their continued education beyond the secondary level. Consequently, many capable rural girls are unable to pursue higher education due to these prevailing social determinants. Furthermore, the availability of higher educational institutions, transportation facilities, and financial resources also affects the

educational participation of rural girls. Limited awareness about career opportunities and societal expectations regarding gender roles may further restrict their access to higher education. These challenges highlight the need to examine the social determinants that influence rural girls' participation in higher education in order to develop effective strategies for promoting gender equity. In this context, the present study aims to explore the social determinants affecting access to higher education among rural girls through a survey approach. By identifying the key factors that influence their educational opportunities, the study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the barriers faced by rural girls and to provide insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders working toward achieving gender equity in higher education.

Different committees and commissions have accepted that education is the most important ingredient in the empowerment process. Although the government has undertaken many programs for the development of rural girls' education and in spite of the equality of status guaranteed under the Indian constitution, double standards prevail in every sector of society, education and social development. Moreover, the social isolation of women contributes to the deterioration of their condition (Mukhopadhyay, 2008). Not all educational programmes are equally beneficial. A review of the literature reveals a high rate of failures of conventional educational programmes both formal and non-formals for rural girls. Starting from the sergeant plan of 1944, many efforts are taken by the government and other statutory organizations like UGC and NCERT to promote female literacy. Article 45 of the constitution emphasizes compulsory universal education. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan is an effort to universalize

elementary education by community ownership of the school system (MHRD, 2005). Programmes in India such as the Adult Education programme (NAEP), National Literacy Mission, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Saakshar Bharat Mission, Right to Education Act (2009) and Functional Literacy for children and girls. There are considerable gaps continue to exist between the theory and practice of basic education for the girls. Not all education programs are equally beneficial. A review of the literature reveals a high rate of failure of conventional educational programs, both formal and non-formal, for rural girls. A number of factors contribute to this failure.

The National Policy on Education (NPE, 1986) as revised in 1992 was landmark in the field of policy on girl's education in that it recognized the need to redress traditional gender imbalances in educational access and achievement. The NPE also recognized that enhancing infrastructure alone will not redress the problem. It recognized that "the empowerment of women is possibly the most critical pre-condition for the participation circumstances including open schooling and ensures that no child is deprived of secondary education of satisfactory quality due to gender, socio-economic, disability and other barriers.

Statement of the Problem

Gender Equity in Higher Education: A Survey of Social Determinants among Rural Girls

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To study the social determinants influencing access to higher education among rural girls.
2. To suggest policy implications and recommendations based on the findings of the study.

NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In recent years, India has made significant progress in expanding access to education, including higher education for women. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), female enrolment in higher education has increased considerably, reaching about 2.07 crore students and constituting nearly 48% of the total enrolment in 2021–22. This indicates an improvement in gender participation in higher education. However, despite this progress, disparities in access to higher education still persist, particularly among girls belonging to rural areas. Empirical studies and national educational data suggest that social factors such as socio-economic status, parental education, cultural norms, and availability of educational infrastructure significantly influence rural girls' participation in higher education. Although female participation in schooling has improved—with girls constituting about 48–50% of enrolment at the secondary and higher secondary levels—many girls still face difficulties in transitioning to higher education due to financial constraints, social expectations and limited institutional facilities in rural regions.

Furthermore, research indicates that socio-cultural barriers such as early marriage, domestic responsibilities, safety concerns, and lack of awareness about higher education opportunities continue to hinder rural girls' educational advancement. These challenges highlight the need for empirical investigation into the social determinants that influence rural girls' access to higher education. Therefore, the present study is important to examine the social determinants affecting access to higher education among rural girls through a survey approach and to provide evidence-based suggestions and policy

implications for improving gender equity in higher education.

Operational Definitions of Key Terms

● **Gender Equity**

Gender equity refers to fairness and equal opportunities for girls and boys in accessing and benefiting from higher education without discrimination based on gender.

● **Higher Education**

Higher education refers to education provided at colleges, universities, and other institutions after completion of secondary education.

● **Rural Girls**

Rural girls refer to female students residing in rural areas or villages who are eligible for or pursuing higher education.

● **Social Determinants**

Social determinants refer to social, cultural, and economic factors such as family background, parental education, socio-economic status, cultural norms, and community attitudes that influence access to higher education.

● **Access to Higher Education**

Access to higher education refers to the opportunity and ability of rural girls to enroll in and continue studies at colleges or universities.

Sr No.	Social Determinant	Indicator	% of Rural Girls
1	Socio- economic Status SES	Girls from low income households attending school	68-72
2	Parental Education	Girls at least with one literate parent	78
3	Gender Attitude	Parents supporting girls education up to Graduation Level	75-78
4	School Access	Girls with access to Primary Education in the village	95
5	School Access	Girls with access to Secondary Education in the village	70
6	Digital Access	Girls with access to smart phones	85-90
7	Digital Access	Girls with digital learning Skills	55-60
6	Safety and Mobility	Parents allowing girls to travel alone to school	63
7	Infrastructure	School with functional girls' toilets	70-75
8	Retention	Girls continuing to Secondary level	65-70
9	Academic Performance	Girls passing Secondary Exams	94-96

Sample

A representative sample of 120 girls living in Moga district were selected for the study. The sample comprised girls selected from all the sections of the community of the village like scheduled caste, backward caste and upper class in equal proportion. The sample was selected on the basis of proportionate sampling technique.

Tool Used

An interview schedule constructed by the investigator is used to get information about the social determinants such as socio economic status, size of the family etc. The study is confined to 120 rural girls selected from Moga district of Punjab state

Data, their presentation, Analysis and Interpretation

The component-wise distribution of items on scale is presented in the following table:

Table: Rural Girls' Education in Punjab across Social Determinants

The data on rural girls' education in Punjab reveal a complex interaction of multiple social determinants that influence both access and outcomes. While access to primary education has reached near universality (around 95%), largely due to government initiatives and improved infrastructure, disparities become more visible at higher levels of education. Only about 65–70% of rural girls continue to the secondary stage, indicating that retention remains a significant concern. Socio-economic status continues to play a crucial role, as girls from low-income households face constraints related to educational expenses, domestic responsibilities and opportunity costs. Parental education emerges as a strong enabling factor, with

nearly 78% of girls having at least one literate parent, which positively influences enrolment and aspirations. Encouragingly, around 75–78% of parents now support girls' education up to graduation, reflecting a gradual shift in gender attitudes. However, deep-rooted socio-cultural norms still affect educational trajectories. Safety and mobility concerns restrict independent movement for nearly 35–40% of girls, limiting their access to distant secondary schools

Similarly, although digital access appears high (85–90%), it is often shared and mediated, resulting in only 55–60% of girls possessing functional digital learning skills. This highlights a persistent gender gap in digital empowerment. Infrastructure improvements, such as availability of girls' toilets (around 72–75%), have contributed positively to attendance, yet gaps remain in rural settings. Interestingly, academic performance among girls is notably high, with pass percentages exceeding 94%, indicating that those who remain in the system perform well. Overall, the findings suggest that while structural access barriers are gradually diminishing, social and cultural determinants continue to shape participation and progression. Addressing these requires a multidimensional approach focusing on economic support, gender sensitization, digital inclusion, and safe educational environments.

Key Findings

1. The study reveals that access to primary education for rural girls in Punjab has reached near-universal levels, reflecting effective implementation of educational policies.
2. Despite high enrolment at the primary level, a significant proportion of rural girls do not continue to the secondary stage, indicating persistent dropout issues.

3. Socio-economic status remains a critical determinant, as girls from low-income families face greater barriers in continuing their education.

4. Parental education has a positive influence on girls' schooling, with educated parents more likely to support higher education.

5. A majority of parents demonstrate favorable attitudes toward girls' education, with nearly three-fourths supporting education up to the graduation level.

6. However, traditional gender norms and cultural expectations continue to restrict girls' educational progression in rural areas.

7. Safety and mobility concerns significantly limit girls' access to schools, especially at the secondary and higher levels.

8. Although access to digital devices is relatively high, it is often shared within households, limiting girls' independent use for educational purposes.

9. A noticeable gap exists in digital skills among rural girls, highlighting inequalities in effective utilization of technology.

10. Improvements in school infrastructure, particularly the availability of girls' toilets, have positively influenced attendance and participation.

11. Rural girls demonstrate high academic performance, often outperforming boys in board examinations

12. Despite better academic outcomes, girls' retention in the education system remains comparatively lower, indicating a performance-participation gap.

13. The focus of education in Punjab is gradually shifting from mere access to quality, skill development, and empowerment.

14. Overall, the findings suggest that social determinants such as economic status, gender norms, parental education, and infrastructure continue to play a decisive role in shaping educational opportunities for rural girls.

Educational Implications

1. Need to shift focus from enrolment to retention and completion

2. Importance of gender-sensitive school environments

3. Integration of digital literacy programs specifically for girls

4. Strengthening career guidance and counseling services in rural schools

5. Promoting parental awareness programs to sustain positive attitudes

6. Emphasizing life skills and empowerment-based education

7. Enhancing teacher training to address gender and socio-cultural issues

Recommendations

Policy Level

- Provide financial incentives/scholarships for rural girls at secondary and higher levels

- Improve transport facilities and safe commuting options

- Ensure full infrastructure coverage (toilets, boundary walls, lighting)

School Level

- Introduce mentorship programs for girls
- Organize gender sensitization workshops
- Strengthen digital learning with individual access for girls

Community Level

- Conduct awareness campaigns to challenge gender stereotypes
- Encourage community participation and support groups (SHGs)
- Promote role models of educated rural women

Research Level

- Further studies on intersection of gender, technology, and rural education
- Longitudinal research on dropout causes among rural girls
- Comparative studies across districts of Punjab

Conclusion

The study highlights that rural girls' education in Punjab has made significant progress in terms of access and enrolment, particularly at the primary level. However, the transition to and retention in secondary education remain critical challenges. While parental attitudes toward girls' education are becoming increasingly positive, socio-economic constraints, gender norms, and safety concerns continue to influence educational participation. The findings also reveal a notable paradox: despite high academic performance among girls, their educational continuity is hindered by structural and cultural barriers. Furthermore, the digital divide, though narrowing in terms of access, persists in terms of usage and skill development. Overall, the study underscores that

educational advancement for rural girls is not solely an issue of availability but is deeply rooted in broader social determinants that shape opportunities and outcomes.

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