

EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN TIRUNELVELI CITY

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Abstract

Women's access to higher education is a crucial determinant of gender equality and overall societal development. Although significant progress has been made globally, many barriers continue to restrict women's participation in higher education. These challenges include financial constraints, socio-cultural norms, gender discrimination, family responsibilities, and limited institutional support. Such factors often discourage or delay women from pursuing academic opportunities. This study examines the complex and interconnected challenges that women face in accessing higher education, particularly the influence of social expectations, economic conditions, and inadequate infrastructure. It also highlights the determination and resilience demonstrated by women in overcoming these obstacles. Many women adopt strategies such as seeking alternative learning opportunities, relying on community support, and advocating for equal rights in education. The findings emphasize the importance of targeted policies, supportive environments, and inclusive educational systems to enhance women's access and participation. By addressing these barriers and strengthening support mechanisms, higher education institutions can empower women to achieve their academic goals and contribute meaningfully to social and economic progress.

Keywords: Community support, Higher education, Gender bias, Policy reforms and Socio-cultural expectations

1 Introduction

Education is a key driver of socioeconomic and technological development, with higher education playing a critical role in building human capital and fostering innovation. In India, although female enrolment has improved, women continue to face barriers in accessing and progressing in higher education. Higher education, encompassing universities and professional institutions, contributes to women's empowerment by enhancing self-reliance, social status, and leadership capabilities. Educated women significantly influence national development, gender equality, and social change. Despite progress, gender disparities persist. Female literacy rates remain lower than those of males, particularly in rural areas. Factors such as socio-cultural norms, financial constraints, safety concerns, and domestic responsibilities limit women's participation in higher education. Nevertheless, many women demonstrate resilience and determination in pursuing education. This study examines the challenges, barriers, and motivating factors affecting women's access to higher education in Tirunelveli City. It also aims to suggest measures to promote educational equity and support women in achieving their academic and professional potential.

2. Review of Literature

Selvan A (2017)¹ identified that there are a number of issues that female student's had to face for gaining their career prospective. Some of the grave issues are as such issues related to family, Educational institutes, Society, Economic problems, Educational problems, Girl dropout ratio has increased with design of gender inequity with approach to education, which seems to be achievable and applicable from urban to rural and to disadvantaged group in the society. Access should be provided for local applicable high-quality in education and providing training opportunities is important to retain rural girl students in Higher education. Anushree S. M. & B Manjunatha (2016)² studied that the role of Higher Education empowering Indian women" It is found that formulating and implementing stringent and powerful laws and policies have addressed the malice of gender discrimination of Higher Education. Most Indian women, with the possibility of economic independence, through respectable employment, have becomes an important earning member of the family. An educated woman has the skills, the self-confidence and the power to be a better citizen. Balve (2015)³ examined that the higher education assists in empowering women as qualified women tend to become leaders in society and it permits them to become role models for younger girls. It also enables women to choose domains of expertise as decision makers through influence on policy related issues to social, economic, and cultural development, or by their participation in family and community life.

3. Statement of the Problem

Access to higher education for women has long been subject of concern globally while significant studies have been made in improving educational opportunities for women, several challenges continue to full participation in higher education. Additionally, in some regions traditional gender roles and safety concerns further restricts women's mobility and academic engagement. This study aims to explore the various challenges women face in accessing higher education, the determination that drivers them to overcome these barriers, and the broader implications of these challenges on women's future opportunities. In many regions, women's educational opportunities are constrained by traditional gender roles that prioritize early marriage, household responsibilities, or vocational training over academic achievement. In addition, inadequate financial resources, lack of scholarships or funding options for women, and the gendered nature of certain academic fields limit their participation in higher education. Moreover, women may face discrimination in academic environments that hinder their academic performance, engagement, and advancement.

4. Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the demographic profile of college students in Tirunelveli City.
2. To examine the significance of women's higher education among college students.
3. To identify the challenges faced by women in accessing higher education.
4. To assess the impact of these challenges on women's participation in higher education.

5. Hypothesis

For the purpose of analysis, the following null hypotheses were framed:

1. There is no significant difference between the education wise classification of the respondents and impact of challenges in women higher education.
2. There is no significant difference between the family income wise classification of the respondents and of challenges in gaining access to higher education in college student.

6. Research Methodology

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design. It is based on both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire specifically designed to capture information related to all relevant variables of the study. Secondary data were obtained from a wide range of sources, including published articles, academic journals, magazines, books, newspapers, and credible online resources. A structured questionnaire was carefully developed and administered to the respondents to collect first-hand information. Prior to conducting the main survey, a pilot study was undertaken with approximately 10 respondents to evaluate the clarity, reliability, and validity of the research instrument. Based on the feedback obtained, necessary revisions were made to enhance the effectiveness and accuracy of the questionnaire. The finalized questionnaires were systematically distributed among the selected respondents. The collected responses were thoroughly examined, verified, and edited to ensure consistency, accuracy, and completeness of the data. The study employed a random sampling technique to select respondents in Tirunelveli city from the target population, thereby ensuring an unbiased and representative sample. The sample size for the study was limited to 125 respondents, which was considered sufficient for meaningful analysis and interpretation of the data. For analysis purpose, the tools used were percentage, Chi-Square test, ANOVA and Friedman ranking method.

7. Data Analysis and Interpretation

7.1 Demographic Profile

The present study examines the demographic profile of 125 respondents, focusing on variables such as gender, age, educational qualification, marital status, children, family size, and residential status. These variables are considered essential for understanding the background characteristics of the respondents in the study area. The data relating to these parameters, along with their frequency and percentage distribution, are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

S. No	Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
1	Gender	Female	94	75.2
		Transgender	31	24.8
2	Age	Below 20	24	19.4
		21 to 30	88	70.2
		31 to 40	10	8.0
		Above 40	3	2.4
3	Education	UG – Arts	53	42.4
		UG – Science	43	34.4
		PG – Arts	14	11.2
		PG – Science	10	8.0
		Ph.D – Arts	2	1.6
		Ph.D – Science	3	2.4
4	Marital Status	Single	88	70.0
		Married	15	12.0

		Unmarried	20	16.0
		Divorced	2	2.0
5	Children	Yes	100	80.0
		No	25	20.0
6	Family Size	Below 2	20	16.0
		3	83	66.4
		4	19	15.2
		Above 4	3	2.4
7	Residence	Rural	51	41.0
		Urban	47	38.0
		Semi-Urban	27	21.0
	Total Respondents		125	100

Source: Primary Data

Interpretation

The table revealed that the majority of respondents are female (75.2%), belong to the 21–30 age group (70.2%), and are primarily undergraduate students in Arts (42.4%). Most respondents are single (70%), have children (80%), and belong to families with three members (66.4%). In terms of residence, a higher proportion comes from rural areas (41%), followed by urban and semi-urban regions.

7.2 Challenges Faced by Respondents in Accessing Higher Education

Data relating to the pursuing higher education –wise classification of the respondents are described in the following table.

TABLE 2: CHALLENGES FACED BY HIGHER EDUCATION

S. No	Pursuing	Frequency	Percent
1	Gender bias or stereotyping	49	39.2
2	Lack of female role models	38	30.4
3	Balancing education with family responsibilities	30	24.0
4	Limited access to resources or mentorship	8	6.4
	Total	125	100

Source: Primary data

Interpretation

Table 2 depict that, out of 125 respondents, 39.2 percent of the respondents were gender bias or sterols typing in the higher education, 30.4 percent of the respondents were lack of female roles models, 24.0 percent of the respondents were balancing education with family responsibilities and 6.4 percent of

the respondents were limited access to resources or mentorship. Hence, it can be concluded that majority of the respondents were gender bias or sterols typing in the higher education.

7.3 Education and Challenges of Women Higher Education

Data relating to the education wise classification of the respondents and challenges of women higher education wise classification of the respondents are described in the following table.

H₀₁ There is no significant difference between the education wise classification of the respondents and challenges of women higher education.

TABLE 3: EDUCATION AND CHALLENGES OF WOMEN HIGHER EDUCATION

Particulars	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	475.56(a)	12	0.001
Likelihood Ratio	111.458	12	0.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	22.471	1	0.000
N of Valid Cases	125		

Source: Computed Data

Interpretation

Since the „P“ values are less than 0.05 at a 5% level of significance, the null hypotheses were rejected. This indicates a statistically significant difference between the education wise classification of the respondents and the challenges of women higher education. Therefore, it can be concluded that have implications for policy makers, educators and advocates for women’s education, highlighting the need to support programs and policies to address the specific challenges faced by women at different education levels.

7.4 Family Income and Importance of Women Higher Education

Data relating to family income wise classification of the respondents and challenges in gaining access to higher education wise classification of the respondents are described in the following table.

H₀₂: There is no significant difference between the family income wise classification of the respondents and challenges in gaining access to higher education.

TABLE 4: FAMILY INCOME AND CHALLENGES IN GAINING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Particulars	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	125.86(a)	12	0.001
Likelihood Ratio	115.762	12	0.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	21.230	1	0.000
N of Valid Cases	125		

Source: Computed Data

Interpretation

Since the P values are less than 0.05 at a 5% level of significance, the null hypotheses were rejected. This indicates a statistically significant difference between the family income wise classification of the respondents and the challenges in gaining access to higher education in college students. Therefore, it can be concluded that have implications for educators, policymakers and college counselors, highlighting the need to support programs and policies to address the specific challenges faced by students from different income backgrounds.

7.5 Age and Challenges Faced by Respondents while Pursuing Higher Education

Data relating to the age wise classification of the respondents and challenges faced while pursuing higher education wise classification of the respondents are described in the following table.

TABLE 5 : AGE AND CHALLENGES FACED BY RESPONDENTS WHILE PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION

S. No	Challenges	Sum of Squares	df	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
1.	Gender bias or stereotyping	2.345	26	1.156	2.168	0.05
2.	Lack of female role models	10.495	23	0.126	2.394	0.06
3.	Balancing education with family responsibilities	6.287	28	0.362	1.106	0.65
4.	Limited access to resources or mentorship	2.421	22	0.276	2.484	0.05

Source: Computed Data

Interpretation

Table 4.29 presents the results of the ANOVA test, examining the association between age and challenges faced while pursuing higher education. Since the „P“ value is greater than 0.05 at a five percent level of significance indicates that the null hypotheses are accepted and that there is no statistically significant difference between the age and challenges faced while pursuing higher education. The calculated F value is 8.152.

7.6 Respondents Role of Family Support to Access in Higher Education

Data relating to the role of family support to access in higher education wise classification of the respondents is described in the following table.

TABLE 6 : ROLE OF FAMILY SUPPORT TO ACCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

S. No	Particulars	Mean Score	Rank
1.	Strong Support	2.19	I
2.	Moderate Support	2.11	II
3.	Minimal Support	1.25	III
4.	No Support	0.29	IV

Source: Computed Data

Interpretation

From the above table 6 showed that, out of 125 respondents, the ranking of respondents regarding, role of family support to access in higher education were as follows: strong family support is ranked as the first (mean score 2.19), second rank moderate support (mean score 2.11), third rank minimal support (mean score 1.25), fourth rank no support (mean score 0.29). Therefore, the majority of the respondents highlight the crucial role of family support ion enabling students to access higher

education. Policy makers and educators can use these results to inform strategies that promote family involvement and support for higher education.

8. Findings

1. Majority (75.2%) of the respondents were female
2. Majority (70.2%) of the respondents fall within the age group of 21 to 30 years.
3. Majority (42.4%) of the respondents were pursuing under graduate UG degrees with UG – Arts.
4. Majority (70.0%) of the respondents were single.
5. Majority (80.0%) of the respondents were having children.
6. Majority (66.4%) of the respondents were having 3 children in their family.
7. Majority (41.0%) of the respondents were living in rural areas.
8. Majority (33%) of the respondents were motivated career opportunities to pursue higher education.
9. Majority (35.2%) of the respondents were challenges in distance or location of educational institutions access to higher education.
10. Majority (76.0%) of the respondents were access the scholarship of higher education.
11. Majority (72.0%) in the respondents were experienced in education.
12. There is no significant difference between the education wise classification of the respondents and challenges of women higher education.
13. There is no significant difference between the family income wise classification of the respondents and challenges in gaining access to higher education.
14. There is no statistically significant difference between the age and challenges faced while pursuing higher education. The calculated F value is 8.152.
15. Majority of the respondents highlight the crucial role of family support ion enabling students to access higher education

9. Recommendations

- Providing scholarships and financial aid specifically for women, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds, to reduce the financial burden of higher education.
- Offering low-interest loans and grants to support women pursuing higher education, particularly in developing countries.
- Expanding online education programs, distance learning, and part-time courses to help women balance academic, family, and work responsibilities.
- Ensuring the availability of childcare services on campuses for women who are mothers, enabling them to continue their education without childcare-related challenges.
- Promoting equal representation of women across all fields of study, especially in traditionally male-dominated areas such as engineering, technology, and science.
- Encouraging women's participation in STEM education through targeted scholarships, mentorship programs, and workshops.
- Challenging gender stereotypes by motivating women to pursue careers in sectors such as technology, finance, and construction.
- Strengthening peer support networks and alumni associations to enable women to share experiences, provide guidance, and build confidence.
- Engaging families and local communities to increase awareness of the importance of women's education and encourage their support.
- Encouraging community leaders to advocate for women's education and challenge cultural norms that restrict access to higher education.
- Developing curricula that emphasize gender equality, women's rights, and the importance of education.

- Ensuring that teaching methods and materials are inclusive, diverse, and gender-sensitive, creating a supportive learning environment for all students.

10. Conclusion

Women's access to higher education remains a significant global issue, influenced by various social, economic, and cultural barriers. Although progress has been made—such as increased female enrollment in many regions—several challenges persist, including gender discrimination, financial constraints, limited family and societal support, and inadequate infrastructure. Overcoming these challenges requires strong determination from women, along with collaborative efforts from governments, educational institutions, families, and communities. Such collective action will help create a more inclusive and equitable education system, enabling women to realize their full potential and contribute meaningfully to society and economic development.

11. References

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