

Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Women's Participation and Leadership in Higher Education

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Abstract:

The 21st century has seen great advances in gender equality, but women's participation and leadership in higher education continue to face chronic hurdles. Despite notable progress in gender equality, women's representation in leadership positions within higher education remains disproportionately low, but recently, women's participation and leadership have increased day by day. This study examines the persistent "glass ceiling" effect, analyzing systemic barriers such as gender bias, work-life balance challenges, limited access to professional networks, and so on. Employing a qualitative approach and secondary data analysis, the research explores institutional and policy interventions that foster gender-inclusive leadership. The findings underscore the necessity of mentorship, leadership training, and gender-responsive policies to enhance women's leadership participation. Addressing these disparities is essential for institutional excellence and social transformation, contributing to the broader discourse on gender equity in academia.

Keywords: Glass Ceiling, Women in Higher Education, Gender Equity, Leadership, Institutional Barriers, Inclusive Policies, Participation.

INTRODUCTION:

In the 21st century, women have been more prevalent in higher education, and they are increasingly occupying leadership positions in this and other domains. Nonetheless, prejudice and discrimination continue to be challenges for women in leadership roles. Between 2014-15 and 2022-23, women's participation in higher education in India rose by 38.4%. Over the past few decades, women's involvement in higher education has grown dramatically. More inclusive and compassionate governance may result from the diverse viewpoints that female leaders can contribute to addressing challenges. Women leaders have the power to advance gender equality and societal transformation. The obstacles Lack of adaptability, bias, and prejudice, fewer relationships, and outdated preconceptions that leadership qualities are masculine. Increasing women's self-esteem, their autonomy, and their capacity to affect societal change are all components of women's empowerment. Reflective leadership takes into account the identities, actions, experiences, and objectives of participants. It also entails taking into account how individuals' actions impact other people.

Higher education has historically been a domain dominated by men, with women facing systemic barriers that have hindered their access, participation, and leadership opportunities.

Despite significant progress over the past century, gender disparities in higher education leadership persist, reflecting broader societal and institutional challenges (Morley, 2013). The metaphor of the “glass ceiling” represents the invisible but formidable barriers that prevent women from ascending to top leadership positions, even when they possess the necessary qualifications and experience (Cotter et al., 2001). In the 21st century, increasing women’s participation in higher education is not merely a matter of equity but a crucial driver of institutional excellence, economic development, and social transformation (UNESCO, 2017).

Presently, women’s enrolment in higher education has grown significantly everywhere in the world, with many countries having more female graduates than their male counterparts in most academic fields (OECD, 2020). However, this growth has not been proportionally reflected in leadership positions. The underrepresentation of women in senior academic and administrative roles such as vice-chancellors, deans, and presidents indicates the persistence of structural and cultural barriers (Morley & Crossouard, 2016). Evidence suggests that gender stereotypes, work-life balance challenges, lack of mentorship, and limited professional networks contribute to these disparities (O’Connor, 2018). Furthermore, higher education institutions themselves often reinforce gendered cultural norms that shape hiring practices, promotions, and leadership development opportunities (Acker, 2012). Institutional cultures tend to favour traditional male leadership styles, sidelining women who adopt collaborative and transformational approaches (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The intersection of gender with race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status further exacerbates the challenges faced by women from marginalised communities (Crenshaw, 1989).

Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach, including policy interventions, mentorship programs, gender-responsive leadership training, and institutional reforms that promote inclusivity (UNESCO, 2022). Many universities and organisations have launched initiatives to foster gender parity in leadership, but progress remains slow and uneven across different regions. This research examined the current state of women’s participation and leadership in higher education in the 21st century, analysing barriers, opportunities, and policy recommendations for achieving gender equity in academia. By critically exploring global trends and institutional practices, this study seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions on breaking the glass ceiling in higher education women’s leadership.

The History of Women’s participation and leadership in Higher Education

In India, social, cultural, and religious constraints severely restricted women’s access to formal education. Girls’ schools should be established, according to early proponents of women’s education, such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. In Bengal, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu in particular, missionary work was instrumental in bringing formal education to women. Being the first women’s institution in India, Bethune Institution’s founding in Kolkata in 1879 was a momentous occasion. The families and society discouraged women from going beyond primary school; thus, they faced significant resistance when they tried to pursue higher education. Women’s involvement in higher education gradually increased by the early 1900s, although it remained limited to the urban and affluent segments of society. The late 19th and early 20th century Indian National Movement was a major force in advancing women’s education as a means of achieving social emancipation. Then, the women were

encouraged to pursue education and participate in the national movement by reformers such as Pandita Ramabai, Sarojini Naidu, and Mahatma Gandhi. Women's colleges like Lady Shri Ram College (Delhi, 1956) and Women's Christian College (Chennai, 1915) were established in the 1920s and 1930s. Although more women were able to enrol in universities thanks to the Government of India Act of 1935, there were still few prospects for them to hold leadership positions.

Following India's 1947 declaration of independence, policies began to favour women's education. Gender equality in education was stressed by the Kothari Commission (1964-66) and the University Education Commission (1948-49). To encourage women to pursue higher education, the government established programs and grants. More women went into professions, including administration, education, and medicine. But even with greater involvement, women's leadership chances in higher education were still scarce. Women's literacy and higher education enrolment increased dramatically in the 1980s as a result of government initiatives, including the National Policy on Education (1986), which placed a strong emphasis on empowering women via education. Mahila Samakhya (1988) was a program designed to encourage rural women to pursue education. This study on women's leadership in higher education and gender-sensitive policies began to take shape in the 1990s. To explore gender differences in academics, colleges founded Women's Studies Centres. Despite these developments, there were still few women in leadership roles at universities, such as directors, deans, and vice-chancellors.

The number of women enrolled in higher education increased significantly between the 2000s and the 2010s. In many states, women's higher education Gross Enrollment Ratios (GERs) exceeded men's (AISHE, 2021). More women pursued careers in research, management, law, and STEM. Although women's representation in leadership positions has improved, inequality still exists: UGC statistics from 2022 state that just 10-15% of vice-chancellors in Indian universities were female. The goal of programs like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (2015) and university gender policies has been to close the gender gap in leadership. Funds for gender inclusiveness and elevating women into leadership positions are key components of the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Nowadays, Women's involvement in higher education in India has changed dramatically over time, from colonial resistance to post-independence reforms and contemporary gender equity measures. Despite advancements, women's leadership positions in academia continue to be difficult to achieve and call for structural changes and legislative attention to guarantee greater participation at the levels of decision-making.

Main Objectives

Objectives Based on the research title "Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Women's Participation and Leadership in Higher Education," here are four research objectives are-

- I. To know the current situation of women's participation and leadership in higher education.
- II. To identify the key barriers hindering women's advancement in leadership in higher education.

- III. To find out the strategies for breaking the glass ceiling and promoting Women's Participation and Leadership in Higher Education.
- IV. To explore the opportunities for Women's Participation and Leadership in Higher Education.

Research Questions

Research questions based on the research title "Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Women's Participation and Leadership in Higher Education," here are four research questions are-

- I. What is the current situation of women's participation and leadership in higher education?
- II. What are the key barriers preventing women from advancing into leadership positions in higher education?
- III. What strategies can effectively break the glass ceiling and enhance gender equity in higher education leadership?
- IV. How do gender, class, and ethnicity intersect to influence women's opportunities in attaining leadership roles in higher education?

METHOD: This study employed a qualitative research approach. Data is gathered from case studies and peer-reviewed literature based on secondary data such as journals, articles, research papers, books, E-books, news, websites, All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), Women Commission reports, NCW, and so on.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Here, findings are discussed based on the objectives of the research-

Objective- i: The current situation of women's participation and leadership in higher education.

Over the years, women's participation in higher education in India has increased significantly. All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22 indicates that women's enrolment in higher education has risen steadily, constituting 49% of total enrolments (Ministry of Education, 2022). This growth is particularly notable in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. Women's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) has improved, surpassing that of men in various areas, particularly the arts, humanities, and social sciences. However, inequalities between genders persist in STEM areas, where women's representation is much lower (Nanda, 2021). Despite increased enrolment, research highlights persistent challenges such as financial limitations, gender norms, early marriage, and, which continue to hinder women's access to advanced education (Bhatia & Sharma, 2020). Women's universities and government scholarships have helped to increase participation, but deep-rooted gender inequalities remain a difficulty.

While women's participation in higher education has increased accordingly, their representation in leadership roles remains low. These studies indicate that women hold fewer than 15% of vice-chancellor positions in Indian universities, with lower representation in premier institutions such as IITs and IIMs (Kumar, 2022). The glass ceiling effect is visible in faculty promotions, decision-making bodies, and administrative positions, where male-

dominated leadership structures prevail (Bhowmick, 2021). Gender prejudice in recruiting and promotion, a lack of mentorship, and issues with work-life balance all contribute to women's underrepresentation in leadership (UNESCO, 2022). Gender quotas, leadership training programs, and institutional support systems are necessary to ensure fair participation in higher education.

Objective- ii: The key barriers hindering women's advancement in leadership in higher education.

The widespread gender bias and preconceived notions about women's leadership potential were among the main challenges. Despite their accomplishments and skills, female leaders were often subjected to harsher scrutiny than their male colleagues. The absence of role models and representation in top positions was another major issue. Aspiring female leaders may find it more difficult to imagine and pursue leadership careers due to a lack of mentorship and visible role models, which can be exacerbated by the underrepresentation of women in high positions. Another crucial issue was work-life balance, particularly in light of societal norms around caring responsibilities. Women sometimes struggle to balance their occupations with disproportionate family and home duties, which might restrict their access to possibilities for career progression. Gender bias and preconceptions were some of the most significant hurdles to women's leadership advancement in higher education in India. Research highlighted that leadership roles in academia are often associated with traditionally masculine traits, leading to implicit biases against female candidates (Bhowmick, 2021). Women in senior academic roles frequently face skepticism regarding their authority, which can hinder professional growth. Women in prominent academic positions frequently experience criticism and doubt about their authority, limiting their professional advancement (Kumar, 2022).

Women in higher education leadership continue to face major challenges in balancing career and domestic duties. Societal expectations frequently force the responsibility of caregiving on women, resulting in work interruptions and reduced prospects for leadership roles (Bhatia and Sharma, 2020). The lack of flexible work regulations, as well as inadequate maternity benefits, exacerbates the situation. Access to mentorship and professional networks is crucial for career advancement, but women in academia frequently fail to locate mentors who can steer them into leadership positions (Nanda, 2021). Many leadership positions in Indian colleges and universities were still acquired through informal male-dominated networks, making it difficult for women to advance to decision-making positions (UNESCO, 2022). Institutional structures and employment procedures frequently lack gender sensitivity, resulting in inequities in promotions and leadership positions (Kumar, 2022). Many Indian colleges and universities lack transparent and regulated career growth strategies, causing women faculty members to advance at a slower rate. Gender bias in selection committees significantly restricted women's opportunities for high administration positions (Ministry of Education, 2022).

Furthermore, networking opportunities for women in leadership roles are frequently restricted. Career advancement depends heavily on professional networks, and women's capacity to use these connections to further their careers may be hampered by their exclusion from male-dominated circles. Organisations and society must work together to address these issues, which result from systemic gender inequality, in order to foster an atmosphere in which female leaders

may flourish, feel secure, and make valuable contributions to their areas. Gender biases, work-life balance issues, a lack of mentorship, and institutional impediments all impede women's advancement into higher education leadership in India. Addressing these difficulties necessitates policy changes, mentoring initiatives, and institutional commitment to gender equality.

Objective- iii: The strategies for breaking the glass ceiling and promoting Women's Participation and Leadership in Higher Education.

To enhance women's leadership representation in higher education, institutions must prioritise gender-inclusive policies, transparent hiring practices, and targeted mentorship initiatives (Ministry of Education, 2022). The University Grants Commission (UGC) has suggested gender equity policies to increase women's engagement, such as gender audits, maternity leave provisions, and leadership training programs (Ministry of Education, 2022). To reduce biases in leadership nominations, institutions should actively encourage transparent hiring and promotion practices. Structured mentorship programs and leadership development initiatives for women in academics can help reduce the leadership gap. Mentoring women leaders increases their chances of advancing to senior positions (Bhowmick, 2021). Creating women's leadership networks within universities can help women overcome institutional hurdles by facilitating professional development and peer support (Nanda, 2021). To help women balance their careers and family responsibilities, higher education institutions must implement flexible work arrangements, childcare support, and parental leave policies. According to studies, universities with family-friendly policies had greater retention rates of female teachers in leadership roles (Bhatia & Sharma, 2020). Equal pay rules and the recognition of women's accomplishments can help to promote a more inclusive academic environment (OECD, 2020).

To address gender disparities in STEM leadership, targeted scholarships, research funds, and institutional incentives should be offered to female faculty and researchers (UNESCO, 2022). Promoting women-led research efforts and ensuring equal representation in decision-making bodies can increase participation in higher education (Kumar, 2022). Breaking the glass ceiling in Indian higher education necessitates policy interventions, mentorship programs, work-life balance support, and specialised initiatives for women leaders. A multi-stakeholder approach encompassing the government, academia, and civil society is required to achieve gender equality in higher education leadership.

Objective- iv: The opportunities for Women's Participation and Leadership in Higher Education.

Government initiatives, scholarships, and legislative reforms have all contributed to the huge increase in the number of women in higher education in India. According to the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22, women now make up about 49% of all higher education enrolments (Ministry of Education, 2022). Policies like the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme, the Postgraduate Indira Gandhi Scholarship for Single Girl Child, and university reservation policies for women have contributed to enhancing access to higher education (Kumar, 2022). Women's participation organisations in India are actively encouraging women's leadership through structured programs. Gender equity committees, women's

leadership training programs, and mentorship networks have all been formed to help women attain leadership positions (Bhowmick, 2021). Some IITs and IIMs have implemented gender diversity policies to boost female representation in teaching and management (Nanda, 2021). Women are increasingly serving as main investigators in research initiatives, resulting in greater engagement in STEM and social sciences. Women researchers in India benefit from government schemes such as the Department of Science & Technology's (DST) Women Scientists Scheme (WOS). Furthermore, women-focused research fellowships and international collaboration possibilities are helping to close the leadership gap (OECD, 2020). Opportunities for women in higher education leadership in India are developing as enrolment, institutional support, leadership training, and research funding increase. However, long-term efforts in mentorship, policy implementation, and institutional commitment are required to promote gender equality in academic leadership.

CONCLUSION

Women's participation and leadership in higher education have changed dramatically over the years, but considerable gender gaps remain. The increase in women's attendance in higher education institutions around the world, including India, demonstrates progress toward gender equity. However, men continue to dominate leadership jobs due to systemic impediments, cultural biases, and institutional structures that prevent women from advancing in their careers. Despite increased female representation in higher education, many women still struggle to obtain leadership roles. The glass ceiling, which is characterised by gender bias, a lack of mentorship, work-life balance issues, and limited networking opportunities, continues to impede women's advancement into senior academic and administrative jobs. Gendered stereotypes, which frequently associate leadership with typically masculine characteristics, compound the situation by fostering an environment in which women's leadership potential is neglected or underestimated. Addressing these barriers necessitates a diverse strategy. Policy interventions like as gender-responsive hiring, mentorship programs, leadership training, and flexible work arrangements can greatly increase women's participation in leadership positions. Institutional commitment to gender equity is critical, with universities developing transparent promotion criteria, gender audits, and affirmative action plans. Furthermore, cultivating an inclusive workplace culture that appreciates varied leadership styles can help to break the long-standing gender prejudice in academics. Government initiatives and regulatory frameworks such as the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme, gender quotas, and leadership programs have all contributed to women's steady ascension to leadership positions in higher education in India. The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 also highlights the importance of gender inclusion in higher education institutions, allowing more opportunities for women to hold decision-making positions. Furthermore, increasing financing for women-led research and targeted scholarships in STEM subjects can assist close gender inequalities in disciplines where female involvement is limited.

Although progress has been made, actual gender parity in higher education leadership will require long-term initiatives. Universities must implement gender-sensitive policies and establish mentoring networks to empower women at all levels of academia. The involvement of more women in decision-making bodies has the potential to result in more representative,

inclusive, and transformational government. Breaking the glass ceiling in higher education leadership is more than just a matter of gender equality; it is critical to institutional success and social advancement. By tackling the institutional and cultural hurdles that impede women's success, academics may fully realise the promise of diverse leadership, resulting in innovation and inclusive growth. The path to gender parity in higher education leadership remains difficult, but with sustained legislative reforms, institutional commitment, and community support, it is an attainable objective that will benefit both higher education and society as a whole.

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