

Mapping Gender Equality in University Practices: An Exploratory Study of Delhi

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Abstract

This study explores gender inequalities in higher education by examining the perceptions and experiences of 200 female postgraduate students from four prominent universities in Delhi—A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews and survey questionnaires consisting of both closed-ended and open-ended questions, the study focuses on the barrier to access, individual experiences, and awareness of government initiatives aimed at promoting the gender equality. Quantitative data from closed-ended responses were analysed by using percentage analysis, while the open-ended responses underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to gender disparity and challenges. The findings reveal significant obstacles female students face and highlight areas where policy can enhance gender equality in higher education institutions. This research contributes to the ongoing discourses on gender equity in Indian universities and offers practical recommendations for policy and institutional reforms.

Keywords: Gender, Gender Equality, Higher Education, NEP 2020, Inequalities

The concept of 'gender' refers to the social categorization of individuals as 'masculine' or 'feminine,' shaped by culturally established roles, expectations, and behaviours (Connell, 2009). Gender extends beyond biological differences, encompassing the social and psychological traits societies ascribe to individuals based on sex. Gender equality in education, as defined by UNESCO, ensures equal opportunities, resources, rights, and freedoms for both males and females to access and attain quality education, ensuring that no gender is disadvantaged in the process (UNESCO, 2015). Educating women is a crucial indicator of societal development, as educated women contribute significantly to overall progress (Mishra, 2022). Higher education serves as a powerful tool for the empowerment of women and the promotion of social change. Women's participation in higher education is vital for achieving gender equality in society (Ghosh & Kundu, 2021).

Universities have the potential to foster gender equality, diversity, and inclusion, thereby influencing both the higher education sector and society at large. However, as gendered organizations, they continue to shape and contribute to gender dynamics (Rosa, Drew, & Canavan, 2020). Achieving gender parity in educational institutions is not only a matter of equity but also a driver for economic and social advancement (Basant, Rakesh, & Sen, Gitanjali, 2010).

Delhi, the capital of India, is not only the nation's political hub but also a major centre for higher education, attracting students from across the country and the world. The city is home to numerous prestigious universities and research institutions that significantly contribute to India's educational landscape. Despite advancements in higher education, gender equality remains a pressing issue. Efforts to promote gender equality include the implementation of gender sensitization programs, scholarships for women in underrepresented fields, and the establishment of gender studies departments that critically examine the intersections of gender, caste, and class (National Commission for Women, 2020). Several universities in Delhi have been at the forefront of fostering gender discourse and research, with dedicated centers for women's studies, such as Jawaharlal Nehru University's Centre for Women's Studies (JNU, 2021). Additionally, universities have begun incorporating gender-sensitization workshops into student orientations to foster a culture of respect and inclusivity (Delhi University, 2022). Some institutions also promote mentorship programs for women, particularly in STEM fields, to reduce the gender gap. However, initiatives often face challenges in implementation. Misra (2022) highlighted the gap in policy documents and offered solutions, noting that effective implementation requires more than policies on paper. Despite the progressive image outlook associated with higher education institutions, issues of gender inequality persist within their structures, policies, and practices.

The objective of this study was to assess gender equality in practices within the universities in Delhi by examining key areas such as classroom practices, faculty behavior, the gendered nature of curricula and pedagogy, and concerns regarding campus safety and harassment. This study aimed not only to highlight the challenges but also to analyze the initiatives taken by these institutions to address gender-based disparities. Ultimately, it sought to offer insights into the complex dynamics shaping the experiences of female students, contributing to a deeper understanding of gender equality in Indian higher education.

Review of Literature

The researcher examined studies from 2019 to 2024 that highlight both the persistent obstacles and the progress made in promoting gender equality within Indian higher education. Supriya (2024) reported a notable rise in female enrolments in postgraduate and doctorate programs during 2019-20. However, this growth was inconsistent across disciplines, emphasizing the need for targeted efforts to promote women's participation in underrepresented sectors. Basantia and Devi (2022) demonstrated how cultural biases and infrastructural deficiencies continue to obstruct women's access to education in Northeast India, underscoring the need for specific targeted interventions in these underdeveloped regions. Misra (2022) critiqued the

National Education Policy 2020, noting that while it aims to promote fairness and inclusivity, its inconsistent implementation often overlooks the needs of marginalized groups. Sharma (2021) identified sociocultural barriers, including traditional gender norms, that hinder women's participation in universities. Singh (2020) stressed the importance of institutional policies in advancing gender equality, calling for strict monitoring to ensure effective execution. Bhattacharya and Gupta (2019) highlighted the need for gender-sensitive curricula to create an inclusive educational environment that supports female students. Collectively, this body of research reveals the multifaceted nature of gender equality challenges in higher education.

Objectives

1. To explore the perceptions of female students regarding gender equality practices in higher education institutions in Delhi.
2. To examine the experiences of female students concerning gender equality in higher education institutions in Delhi.

Need of the study

Universities in Delhi are known for their diversity, representing a wide range of disciplines, ideologies, and cultures. Historically, some institutions have played a central role in shaping India's post-colonial intellectual landscape, while others are recognized for their progressive student politics and activism. However, these universities have also been sites of intense gender debates, particularly regarding safety, representation, structural inequalities, and violence. Gender discrimination often takes subtler forms, such as unequal access to research opportunities, mentorship, and funding. Additionally, curricula and pedagogical practices frequently reflect gender biases, reinforcing stereotypes.

In this broader context, it is critical to examine how universities in Delhi navigate global trends and address (or fail to address) gender inequality. In recent years, numerous incidents of sexual harassment, discrimination, and violence have emerged from various educational institutions across India, understanding the challenges faced by women in these environments is crucial, as it provides valuable insights from their perspectives. This investigation is essential for developing effective strategies to promote gender equality and inclusivity within academic settings.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to explore the issue of gender equality in higher education institutions in Delhi. The quantitative component employed a survey research design, while the qualitative component utilized a narrative research approach. Narrative inquiry

captures individuals' rich experiences and unique perspectives through recorded interviews, weaving them into a compelling narrative (Wells, 2011). This approach is particularly effective in revealing the complexities of gender equality in higher education.

Population and Sample

The study focused on final-year Master's students from various higher education institutions in Delhi. A purposive sampling method was used to select 200 female postgraduate students from four universities in Delhi using a purposive sampling method for this study.

Table 1: Sample Distribution

Universities	A	B	C	D	Total Sample
Number of Students	50	50	50	50	200

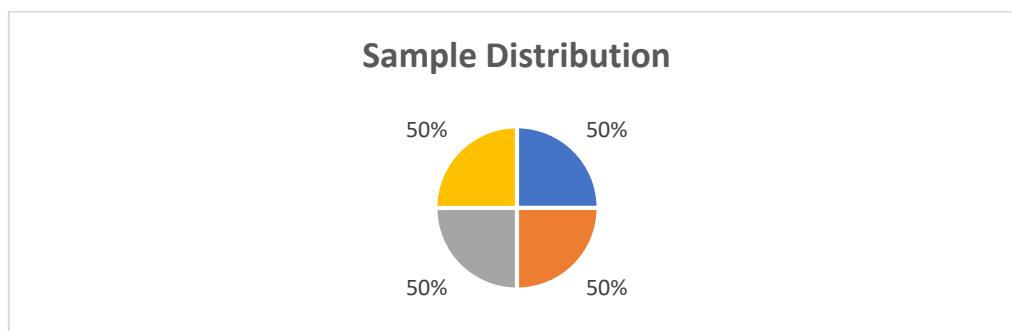


Figure-1

Data Collection Tool and Procedure

The investigator developed a structured survey questionnaire to achieve the first objective and a semi-structured interview schedule to meet the second objective. The development of the questionnaire followed several crucial steps. The researcher identified key dimensions of gender equality in education, such as Equal Educational Opportunities, Gender-based Discrimination, Classroom Dynamics, Faculty Mindset and Behaviors, Access to Academic Guidance, Gender-Sensitive Curriculum, Availability of Complaint and Counselling Services, and Harassment. Based on these dimensions, twenty specific items were carefully designed, including closed-ended questions to facilitate quantitative analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data collected from the surveys were analyzed using percentage analysis to identify trends and patterns related to gender disparities in higher education. In addition, qualitative data derived from interviews were subjected to thematic analysis to capture deeper insights into the participants' experiences.

Objective 1: To explore female students' perceptions regarding gender equality practices in higher education institutions in Delhi.

Table 2: Percentage of Agreeing Students on Practices of Gender Equality in Higher Education

S.No.	Gender Equality in Universities Practices (Statements)	Agreement of the University Students %
1.	Do you agree that all genders have equal educational opportunities in your institution?	78%
2.	Have you ever experienced gender-based discrimination in your Institution?	40%
3.	Do you agree that all genders are treated equally in your classroom?	80%
4.	Have you experienced any Discrimination and gender bias from faculty members in evaluations, feedback, or grading?	75%
5.	Do you agree your institution's curriculum adequately represents the perspectives and sensitivity towards all genders?	17%
6.	Do you agree that your institution is equally accessible to all genders?	70%
7.	Have you ever felt unsafe on campus because of your gender identity?	55%
8.	Do you know about any policies or support systems in place at your institution to report and address gender-based harassment or discrimination?	15%
9.	Have you ever experienced or witnessed gender-based harassment (e.g., sexual harassment, discriminatory comments) in the classroom, or in campus?	75%
10.	Do you agree that your institution includes sufficient representation of all genders in leadership positions (e.g., Dean, HoD)?	12%
11.	Do you agree that your institution is making efforts to promote gender equality through policies, and awareness campaigns?	30%
12.	Are counselling services, and complaint forums available in your campus?	25%
13.	Have you changed your academic plan or dream due to challenges	47%

related to your gender?	
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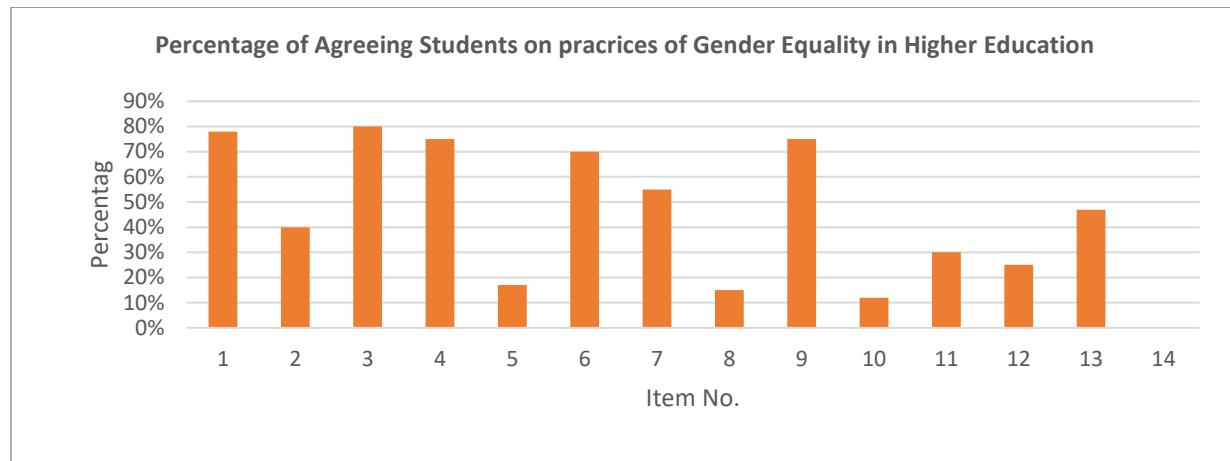


Figure 2

Result and Discussion

Equal Opportunities

A significant 78% of students believe that all genders have equal educational opportunities, reflecting a positive perception of institutional policies.

Experiences of Discrimination

However, 40% of respondents reported experiencing gender-based discrimination during admissions or scholarship applications, highlighting persistent barriers despite the perceived equality. Additionally, an alarming 75% of students reported experiencing or witnessing gender bias or discrimination from faculty in evaluations and feedback, underscoring a pervasive issue that demands urgent attention.

Classroom Dynamics

Encouragingly, 80% of respondents believe that all genders are treated equally in classroom discussions and group projects, indicating a positive academic environment.

Gender-Sensitive Curriculum and Representation

Only 17% of students perceive the curriculum as adequately representing contributions from all genders, exposing a critical gap in inclusivity and gender-sensitive education.

Safety Concerns

More than half of the respondents (55%) reported feeling unsafe on campus due to their gender identity, raising serious concerns about campus safety and the overall environment.

Awareness of Policies

Only 15% of students are aware of policies or support systems for reporting gender-based harassment and discrimination, indicating an urgent need for increased visibility of available

Representation in Leadership

Only 12% of respondents agreed that there is sufficient representation of all genders in leadership positions, highlighting a significant gendered disparity in institutional governance.

Active Promotion of Gender Equality

Only 30% of respondents believe that the institution is actively promoting gender equality, suggesting a need for more proactive and visible efforts on these issues.

It can be concluded that while the data indicate some progress, it also reveals significant challenges in achieving gender equality in higher education. These findings call for immediate and concerted efforts to address pervasive issues and create a truly inclusive academic environment.

Objective 2: To Explore the Experience of Gender Equality in Higher Education.

The semi-structured interviews with students revealed profound insights into their lived experiences, particularly regarding gender equality in higher education institutions.

Gender Bias in Educational Institutions

Most of the students reported they did not experience gender bias, but a few disagreed, and one respondent highlighted her encounters with discrimination stating:

"I have experienced various forms of discrimination that have significantly impacted my academic journey, I faced unequal treatment based on my minority and low socioeconomic status, even within a minority institution, minority professors perpetuated the perception that minority women are not competitive and do not belong in higher education, one professor advised me against pursuing a PhD, suggesting that job opportunities for minority women are predominantly limited to a few minority-serving institutions. He told me to seek employment in a school setting instead of committing to a doctoral program. This was disheartening".

Such narratives underscore the importance of thoroughly investigating the biases that persist in educational systems. Existing literature supports this perspective highlighting the subtle yet pervasive nature of gender bias. For instance, Singh et al. (2023) explored disparities in education expenditure based on gender in India, revealing how socioeconomic factors perpetuate gender inequalities. Additionally, Mardani et al. (2023) emphasized the systemic discrimination faced by underrepresented minority faculty, shaping students' perceptions of belonging and competitiveness. They advocate for policies fostering inclusivity and enhanced support, especially for marginalized students.

Safety and Security Concerns and Sexual Harassment on Campus

Respondents indicated that these issues of safety and sexual harassment are often silenced or denied by the institution, discouraging open discussion or reporting. One participant stated:

"Sexual harassment has been a significant deterrent for me. Many Ph.D. scholars have abandoned their programs due to harassment by faculty members. Numerous cases have been reported, leading to the suspension of professors and even deans. I had dreamed of doing a PhD, but I have changed my plans."

This resonates with existing literature, highlighting how systemic issues contribute to a culture of silence. Rosenthal et al (2016) emphasize a gender-biased mindset creates barriers to women's educational attainment.

One respondent shared "A professor called me into his official chamber and touched me inappropriately, I was traumatized. Although I complained to the university, they did not take action. They said the professor had been suspended but he remained working confidently."

Sexual harassment in higher education institutions in India has become a critical issue affecting student retention and academic progression, particularly among PhD scholars. Studies (Aina & Kulshreshta, 2017; Singh & Sharma, 2021) documented the detrimental impact of harassment on scholars discontinuing due to inappropriate faculty behaviour. The persistence of harassment creates a toxic environment that disrupts students' academic progress.

Gender-Sensitive Curriculum, Faculty and Classrooms

Most of the respondents agreed that the curriculum does not adequately address gender issues. one respondent shared:

"The curriculum lacks a gender-sensitive perspective, reinforcing stereotypes. topics relevant to women's contributions are often omitted, limiting critical thinking and inclusive learning opportunities."

The absence of a gender-sensitive approach reinforces harmful stereotypes and restricts engagement with women's achievements. Husain (2024) highlights the omission of women's contributions from curricula, which limits inclusivity. Another respondent noted:

"I've noticed favouritism in the classroom, with teachers. Offering preferential treatment in assessment based on perceived socioeconomic status and appearance rather than actual talent."

This reflects findings by Munir et al. (2023) who suggest that socioeconomic status and appearance biases overshadow genuine talent deepening inequalities.

Gender Stereotype

One respondent recounted facing gender stereotypes within the academic environment.

Sharing: A faculty member often remarked in the class

“Women occupy every position; even the Head of Department is a woman, yet at home, they remain weak, he regularly criticized the academic integrity of female faculty members.”

This illustrates the pervasive bias that undermines women's authority and accomplishments. It reinforces outdated gender roles, suggesting that women's power is limited to professional domains while dismissing their contributions at home.

Research by Coley et al. (2023) similarly found that in efforts to increase STEM fields, gender stereotypes persist impeding progress.

Gender-Sensitive Policies and Support System

The majority of respondents reported that current policies and support systems are insufficient to tackle the issues and one respondent shared:

“Many girls are scared to complain about the harassment due to the fear of defamation, complaints are often ignored or action is delayed. my peers avoid certain faculty members' or extracurricular activities out of fear.”

another respondent added:

“I had to withdraw from the course due to anxiety attacks and insomnia. When I filed a complaint, I was told no action would be taken against the professor because of his position.

Research indicates that many Indian universities have implemented gender-sensitive policies; their effectiveness is inconsistent. Roy et al. (2023) highlighted the sexual harassment and the inadequacies of institutional responses, while Alam et al. (2023) highlighted the support system for women in higher education. These findings underscore the need for stronger institutional efforts to address gender bias and insufficient policy enforcement.

Implications

Incorporating gender studies into the curricula is essential to raise awareness of gender-related issues. Regular gender sensitivity training for faculty and staff can create a more supportive atmosphere, reducing biases in teaching and assessment. Mentorship programs and support networks for underrepresented genders can address retention issues and promote academic success. Encouraging research on gender equality will also facilitate innovative solutions to existing barriers, and contribute to the broader discussion on equality in education.

Conclusion

Universities in Delhi have made strides in achieving gender parity in enrolment and implementing safety measures, but deeper institutional barriers to gender equality remain. Faculty representation, gender bias in curricula, and campus safety are areas in need of reform. Nonetheless, ongoing efforts to foster inclusivity reflect the potential of universities to lead by

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