WOMEN IN ACADEMIA: AN INDIAN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

'Time for equality at work', the first Global Report on discrimination, highlighted the high economic, social and political costs of tolerating discrimination at work, and argued that the benefits stemming from more inclusive workplaces surpassed the cost of dealing with discrimination. Traditionally, universities have been at the forefront in developing and implementing equity policies, but the literature analysing the impact of these policies is limited. The "Ivory Tower of Academia" is not exactly immune to the phenomena of glass ceiling. For instance, out 54 central universities (CU) there are only 4 CU where women are occupying coveted post of Vice- Chancellor (VC) in remaining others men are ruling the roost. The paper explores the status of women's in higher education (HE) leadership in India. The data suggests the academy mirrors the rest of society; gender inequity still exists in academic settings in India. The findings imply that while things have improved, women still face barriers in academia both such as overt and subtle institutional and cultural forms of discrimination. Patriarchal mentality, biological factors, and family among others are main hurdles that halt women to scale the ladder of the academy.

Keywords: Gender segregation, India, Women.

"It is impossible to think about the Welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. Is it possible for a bird to fly on only one wing?"

Swami Vivekananda

Introduction

Gender equality legislation and policy initiatives and changes in socio-economic gender relations, among others have all contributed to increasing numbers of women undergraduate students globally (Leathwood and Read, 2009; Morley, 2012). The Global Gender Parity Index of 1.08 means that there are now slightly more women

undergraduates than men enrolled in higher education worldwide. Nevertheless, high rates of women's participation in higher education have yet to translate into access to leadership and decision-making positions OECD (2010). This study presents an analysis of publicly available data on university employment exploring gender segregation in the university workforce with a focus on vertical segregation amongst managerial echelons in India. The methodology involves a literature review of research that captures trends and issues in India as well as other countries. Data for this research is obtained mainly from secondary sources such as academic journals, books, reports, government's database and universities' web pages etc.

The Position of Women in Academia: Missing Leaders

Women's absence from senior leadership is a recurrent theme in studies in the global north (Bagilhole and White, 2011; Elg and Jonnergård, 2010). It has also emerged as a theme in studies from the global south in the past two decades (Dunne and Sayed, 2007; Gunawardena *et al*, 2006). Therefore, lack of women in senior positions implies that women are globally under-represented across all decision-making arenas.

From the limited statistical data on the topic (She-Figures, 2009; Singh, 2002), it appears that a gender gap remains in **leadership of higher education globally.** She-Figures (2009) reported that throughout the 27 countries in the EU, 13% of institutions in the HE sector were headed by women. Only 9% of universities that award PhD degrees were headed by women. The highest shares of female rectors (vice chancellors) were recorded in Sweden, Iceland, Norway, Finland, and Israel. **Similar dismal trends were noticed in Asia i.e.** Japan: 2.3%, India: 3% Kuwait: 3%, and Turkey: 7% (University News World, Oct 2020). **The table I below displays percent of women heading university in select countries.**

Table I: Women Vice-Chancellors in selected Countries (2020)

Sweden	Norway	Sri Lanka	UK	India	Japan
43%	31.8%	21.4%	17%	3%	2.3%

(**Source:** University World News, 2020)

The book, '*European perspective on women in educational management'* observes that the pyramid and the glass ceiling are found everywhere (Sutherland, 1997). Davies (1996) observed that women enter adjunct roles but do not attain the most senior

organisational positions. In some locations, there has been a feminisation of penultimate leadership positions. In Australia, for example, women constitute 40% of the pro-vice-chancellors but only 18% of the vice-chancellors (Bagilhole and White, 2011).

Theoretical Framework: Literature Review

The leadership prospect for women managers is a critical issue in gender equality and remains a researchable proposition. This review provides background information on issues pertaining to women representation and challenges faced by them in management across different countries including India.

Singh (2002) has categorised three perspectives to explain the dearth of women in senior administrative positions, namely, *'person centred', 'structure centred' and 'culture centred'*. The *Person Centred* focus attributes the paucity of women to the psychosocial attributes, attitudes and behavioural pattern of women themselves, reinforced by society which is inherently patriarchal. The *'Structure Centred' or 'Institutional Centre'* paradigm is a result of the disadvantageous position of women in the organisational structure – few women at top, less power, limited access to resources, bias in recruitment, promotion and so on. *The Culture Centred* approach relates to the process of socialisation, carrying irrelevant gender based roles to the workplace. Women's role at workplace is seen as secondary to her role as homemaker and nurturer.

The global literature can be classified into at least five analytical frameworks (Morley, 2012). **A) The Gendered Division of Labour:** Leadership is often perceived to be at odds with the demands of motherhood, domestic responsibilities, and work/life balance. **B) Gender Bias and Misrecognition:** Misrecognition is the way in which wider society offers demeaning, confining or inaccurate readings of the value of particular groups or individuals. Gender bias has been theorised in terms of the dominant group 'cloning' themselves - appointing in their own image to minimise risk (Gronn and Lacey, 2006). **C) Management and Masculinity:** It is hypothesised that a good leader is defined according to normative masculinity (Binns and Kerfoot, 2011). The skills, competencies and dispositions deemed essential to leadership including assertiveness, competitiveness, autonomy and authority are embedded in socially constructed definitions of masculinity (Knights and Kerfoot, 2004). **D) Greedy Organisations:** Leadership has been classified as an all-consuming activity, generating an uncontrollable commotion of workplace demands (Lynch, 2006). **E) Missing Agency:** Thinking about women in organisations has

focussed on three areas - *fix the women* (enhancing women's confidence and self-esteem, empowerment, capacity); *fix the organisation* (Gender Mainstreaming, Institutional Transformation); and *fix the knowledge* (identifying bias, curriculum change) (Schiebinger, 1999).

The study by Koshal, *et al* (2006), states that in India 2 women per 100 economically active men take administrative and managerial positions in India. The authors insist that motherhood and exclusion from informal networks adversely affect women's career. Kulkarni (2002) states that it is the traditional and cultural inhibitions acquired by women during socialization which are the key hurdles that inhibited their urge to be in the executive or leadership position. Budhwar, *et al* (2005), underline that major challenges women face today are balancing dual role of division of labour, discrimination at work and stereotypes.

What is evident from the above discussion is that women in India experience a slower progression compared to their male counterparts. While entry is easier, growth slows and in most situations regardless of their qualifications, performances or achievements, women are prevented from climbing the ladder to the top. Although a few women have made it to the very top in the world of work, the phenomenon of 'glass ceiling' is still very much prevalent in India as well as in other countries.

The Position of Women in Higher Education Institutions in India

India has fared badly in removing gender-based disparities, ranking 114 out of 142 countries in World Economic Forum's 2020 gender gap index. India is part of the 20 worst-performing countries on the labour force participation, estimated earned income, literacy rate and sex ratio at birth indicators. This report suggests that the numbers of women are increasing in top positions in politics (India is ranked 15 in GGI, 2020). Yet top management in higher education is overwhelmingly a male preserve (in the same report India is placed at 134 and 126 for Economic participation and opportunity and Education attainment respectively). In India, women are best represented in lower level academic and middle management positions and their participation relative to men decreases at successively higher levels.

One of the most important findings from the effort to gain information on the representation of women in these positions is that, although bodies such as the University Grants' Commission and the Association of Indian Universities put out a variety of

statistics on higher education in India, there are hardly any comprehensive national statistics on the gender composition of the different academic and administrative positions in the system.

So far the University Grants Commission has received 17 chairpersons but since its inception, UGC is headed by women only two times. UGC was first headed by a woman, Dr (Smt) Madhuri R Shah in 1981 and followed by Dr (Miss) Armaity S Desai in1995. Moreover, yet women have not opened their account in case of occupying the office of Vice-Chairperson and Secretary of UGC. Shockingly, none of the twenty three prestigious Institutes of Technology (IITs) in the country have as yet been headed by women. The IITs, are predominantly a male club that never had a woman director or scientist in its council.

The number of women in higher education is now equal to, and in many South Asian countries surpasses, men at undergraduate level. Yet, this has not translated into senior appointments and leaderships positions within higher education institutions themselves. For example, 2020 UGC study found reported, country's 495 CU and State universities, only 3% vice-chancellors are women (six of the 13 female vice-chancellors are at women-only institutions). While 60% of the country's university lecturers are women, the proportion falls to 40% at the level of associate professor and slumps to 20% at the professor level. The table II above reports startling very low figure of women managers [VC, PVC and Registrar] in CUs.

Table II: Women Administrators in Central Universities in India (2020)

Vice Chancellor				Pro Vice Chancellor				Registrar			
Male	%	Female	%	Male	%	Female	%	Male	%	Female	%
37	92.5	3	7.5	15	93.3	1	6.7	31	96.8	1	3.2

(**Source:** compiled from universities' website)

Barriers to participation in higher education management

Paradoxically, the hope is that academic life is a sphere where in theory; women should find few barriers to opportunity. But the reality seems to be that 'academia has been perceived as traditionally elitist, male and patriarchal in its workplace culture, structure and values' (Lund, 1998:1). The following are main encumbrances that constrain women in the academy.

1. Limited Access to Higher Education

Lata Pillai, former PVC, IGNOU, says "Social factors adversely affect girls' education and gender discrimination exists from primary education level". Mostly boys are encouraged to continue their education. On similar line, Professor Amita Chatterjee, former VC of Presidency University pointed "the percentage of women who are educated and capable of handling the organised sector is less."

Cultural values and cultural stereotypes, which see women either as the archetypal seductress, or as vulnerable and in need of protection, or destined for a nurturing, domestic role are again in evidence in the restrictions placed on girls within formal education systems (Dines, 1993). Such institutionalization does not prepare girls for full and equal participation in the workforce and thereby limits their career horizons

2. Discriminatory Appointment and Promotion Practices

Several scholars (Grummel *et. al.*, 2009; Gronn and Lacey, 2006) note that in spite of the difficulties that women face in gaining access to education, there are women well-qualified for academic positions who nevertheless fail to be selected. Invariably both politicians and bureaucrats are predispose to patriarch ideology – 'a man is preferred because he is a man'.

Dr Armaity Desai, also a member of the UGC capacity-building committee, says the former Ministry for Human Resource Development is gender-blind: "I wrote to them when the selection for the new central universities and JNU was being done. JNU is supposed to be a trend-setter. It has a history of strong women teachers who are experts in their fields. Yet they have not had a single woman vice chancellor till 2022." Desai says. Alike, Jancy James, former VC, Central University of Kerala, reveals "when you talk of UGC or education departments, giving leadership to women in academic administration is never a priority. It is more of an accident. I am the first woman vice chancellor in the state of even if it was as late as 2008"

3. Dual Responsibilities of Traditional and Professional Roles

Jaya Indiresan, former professor of organisational behaviour at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and member of the UGC's National Consultative Committee on Capacity Building of Women Managers in Higher Education, says women set themselves apart from men in the way they deal with personal issues, and this affects their ability to take

up leadership positions. She emphasized that "most women academicians take time off whenever their children are appearing for the Board exams," she says. "Do the men ever do that? By taking those two months off, women limit themselves in a way." Clearly the message they are sending is that they are willing to put their professional responsibilities on hold if they interfere with their family duties.

4. Cultural and Structural Barriers

These are the many overt and covert 'glass-ceiling' factors that impede women's career paths. These include: male managerial styles, discourse and language that 'shut' women out; informal organizational cultures also referred to as the 'old boys club'; and domestic responsibilities as priority over career aspirations (Luke, 1999).UGC committee member, Dr Desai, blames the situation on Indian society. "Our society is largely a patriarchal one," she says. Desai goes on to say, "Because men headed most important universities and institutes at one point of time, women are not considered capable (of the responsibility). Women are dismissed on flimsy grounds - family and private responsibilities. People start questioning whether a woman leader can function both in her private and professional space. So women find that it is not good enough to be as good as men, but are pushed to establish their credibility by being better than men.

5. Stereotyping

Women in advanced industrialised societies as well as those in the developing world still suffer from the myth that women are too emotional or too illogical for senior management, or best suited to the domestic maintenance aspects of administration. The concept of social cognition suggests that we 'think gender' and that we have deeply embedded notions of gender-appropriate behaviour and roles. When we think 'manager', we think 'male' (Schein *et.al.*, 1996). Amita Chatterjee pointed out, "Sometimes it is believed that women are not able to take hard decisions, or even make rational ones, because they are guided by emotions. In Asia, Morley *et al.* (2012) found that leadership was perceived as demanding, aggressive and authoritarian and more fitting for males.

Conclusion

Because of these institutionalized practices, patterns and beliefs, women are often assumed to be less available for leadership positions by those who hire. Additionally, many women make career decisions around issues of family, while many men make family decisions around issues of career. It would be simplistic to say that men or women

managers in higher education in India today can achieve much unless efforts to improve their capabilities are accompanied by some basic structural changes in the system and by a concerted effort to halt the politicization which dominates the system. The global literature suggests that women and men in higher education are largely placed differently, with differential access to leadership, and hence to influencing meanings, discourses and practices. The gendered world of HE affects the very nature of knowledge production itself. Women are entering HE leadership, albeit in low numbers. Positive interventions by the government are sine qua non to expedite this momentum to make academy sustainable and gender neutral.

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