

Empowering Women Through Higher Education: the Kerala Episode

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Abstract 'Empowering women' has become a buzzword in our socio-economic parlour. Several initiatives in line with empowering and emboldening women have been on the roll. Provision of education in general and higher education in particular has been seen as a potent tool in mainstreaming women everywhere. India is not an exception in this regard. Among the Indian States, Kerala has exhibited a unique model based on education and health. Despite the bold attempt of the State in mainstreaming women through Democratic Decentralisation and provision of higher education, the fact remains that women in Kerala are not proportionately represented in the decision making bodies of Universities like Senate, Syndicate, Academic Councils, Board of Studies and so on. As regards women representation in responsible positions like Registrars, Pro-Vice Chancellors, Vice Chancellors, Faculty Deans etc., their presence is conspicuous by their absence. For example, out of the 12 Universities in Kerala, we have only one women Vice-Chancellor and a Pro-Vice Chancellor. This is the case with other dignified positions in the field of higher education. The paper underlines the need for enhanced women participation in decision making bodies of higher education like Universities for their empowerment.

Keywords: Kerala, Women empowerment, Decision making bodies, Enrolment of women, Women University, Women Studies.

INTRODUCTION

Empowerment of women is enabling women to realize their full potentialities and motivating them to utilize them to be truly empowered. Empowerment is a process which neutralises the forces that try to marginalise the development of women socially, politically and economically. Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process. Education in general, and higher education in particular, has an enabling role in emboldening the women community. Education of

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women, therefore, ought to occupy top priority among the many measures taken to improve the status of women in any society. It is a well-known fact that education empowers women, increases women's status in the community and leads to greater input into family and community decision making.

The need for educating women in the Indian context need not be over emphasised. Education provides women with a basic knowledge of their rights as individuals and citizens. Knowledge also gives them access to decision making power which can serve to place women on a more equal footing with their male counterpart. With women constituting nearly 50 per cent of the population, educating them is a necessary condition to ensure the development of the Nation itself. Education is considered as a merit good as the value of education rests not only for the person acquiring it, but also for others. The benefits of women's education are compounded across generations. Girls who have been educated are likely to marry later and to have smaller and healthier families. Educated women can recognize the importance of health care and know how to seek it for themselves and their children. Education helps girls and women to know their rights and to gain confidence to claim them. However, women's literacy rates are significantly lower than men's in most developing countries.

The neglect of education to the women is one of the major reasons for their unequal status in the society. Denial of access to organised knowledge to women from the ancient times in our country contributed to the increasing subordination of women. However, some improvement could be witnessed during the colonial rule in the matter of women education. Rigid attitudes towards women's education softened, setting in trends for co-education and emphasis on higher education. In Independent India efforts are continuing to place women in her right perspective. Higher educational policies attest the value and benefits of women education and a host of policies have been announced to that effect. It has resulted in higher enrolment ratio among the women and they started occupying highest echelons in the society. Still, a long way has to be travelled to ensure women the right place in the higher education space of our country. In this background, this paper reviews the achievements of higher education and its impact on the empowerment of the women community in Kerala, a state known for its Model of Development based on human development.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The general objective of the study is examining the status of women in the higher education sector of Kerala vis-à-vis India. The specific objectives are: (i) to examine the enrolment of women among the various programme of studies; (ii) to understand the position of educated women in the work participation

rate, and (iii) to analyse the role played by women in the decision making bodies related to higher education.

METHODOLOGY

The study is exclusively based on secondary data. Information collected from the publications of the UGC, State Government and other journals are extensively used. The Economic Review of the State Planning Board of Kerala was a rich source material in the preparation of this paper.

KERALA'S EXPERIENCE

The uniqueness of Kerala model lies in the achievement of the state in the field of education. Kerala's achievements in the field of education viz., near total literacy, free and universal primary education, low drop-out rate at the school level, easy access to educational institutions, gender equality in access etc. -are well known. In these respects, Kerala is often compared not only with the other Indian states or developing countries but also with some of the developed countries. Through the concerted efforts of the successive governments in power, the state has been able to achieve many credentials in the area of education and development. Now, Kerala has a vast network of educational institutions catering to the needs of the aspiring generations. Kerala's education system has emerged as the single largest economic activity of the state. Government expenditure on education as a ratio of the state domestic product despite decline in recent years is one of the highest in the country.

In the sphere of higher education too, our state has shown spectacular achievements. There has been considerable increase in the number of universities, colleges and other institutions in the last few decades. At present we have 11 Universities, 195 Arts and science colleges(excluding unaided colleges), 157 Engineering colleges. There has been a considerable improvement in enrolments as well. If we analyse the enrolment of the women in the higher education system of our country, it is clear that Kerala has the highest percentage of women enrolment among the Indian States(see Table 1).

If one compare the achievements in women's enrolment in higher education with the all-India average (41.6 Per cent) with that of Kerala (57 percent), there is every possibility for complementing Kerala for its achievements in promoting women empowerment through higher education. If we make a comparison with the South Indian States also (see Table 2), the position of Kerala is far ahead of their achievements in women enrolment in higher education.

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Table 1: State wise details in Universities & Colleges: 2009-10

State	Per cent of women enrolment	No. Affiliated Colleges
Andhra Pradesh	40	3777
Arunachal Pradesh	41	16
Assam	43	481
Bihar	30	683
Chathisgarh	35	603
Delhi	48	234
Goa	59	56
Gujarat	43	1736
Haryana	43	852
Himachal	48	352
Jammu	45	327
Jharkand	34	209
Karnataka	43	2907
Kerala	57	956
MP	37	1922
Maharashtra	43	4249
Manipur	45	78
Meghalaya	51	70
Mizoram	47	32
Nagaland	47	52
Orissa	42	1064
Punjab	51	940
Rajasthan	38	2289
Sikkim	39	13
Tamil Nadu	49	2234
Tripura	44	32
Uttar Pradesh	38	3786
Uttarkhand	45	375
West Bengal	39	891
A & N Islands	52	8
Chandigarh	51	25
Lakshadweep	35	1
Daman & Diu	47	4
D & N Haveli	47	1
Puduchery	50	76
India	41.6	31324

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Source: UGC Annual Report, 2009-10

Women Enrolment in Various programmes in Kerala

It is interesting to examine the status of women enrolment in various programs offered through the universities and colleges. The information provided in Table 3 is an indication that women representation in Engineering and other technical programs are far from satisfactory. The entry barriers of women to professional courses are a matter of concern in our state. However, no serious efforts in this line are followed in the state. In a period where we are all speaking about the issue of access, one can not undermine the position of women in the field of professional education of Kerala. Also, the expansion of professional colleges are more than the non-professional colleges in Kerala in the recent times. When we analyse the enrolment of women in research programmes, their participation is not praiseworthy. This is mainly due to their familial and other personal pre-occupations.

The problem of Unemployment among the women

Despite the higher level of attainments among the women, they are the most unemployed category in Kerala. The National Sample Survey revealed that apart from the high incidence of unemployment among women in general, the youth seem to have a high unemployment rate in the State. Young men

Table 2: Enrolment of women in Higher education in South Indian States.

State	Percentage
Andhra Pradesh	40.0
Karnataka	43.0
Kerala	57.0
Tamil Nadu	49.0
All India	41.6

Source: Ibid

Table 3: Enrolment of women in various programmes of Studies (2011-12).

Programmes	Percentage of women
Arts & Science	69.78
Degree programmes	69.05
PG Programmes	79.28
Engineering(UG)	40.00
Engineering(PG)	55.03
Polytechnics	32.59

Source: state Planning Board, Government of Kerala.

Table 4: Education Specific Work Participation Rates for Persons of Age 15 Years and above.

Level of Education	Kerala				India			
	Rural Male	Rural Female	Urban Male	Urban Female	Rural Male	Rural Female	Urban Male	Urban Female
Not Literate	72.0	35.9	54.6	20.1	89.5	51.3	83.9	27.1
Literate, up to Primary	83.2	37.0	81.5	31.2	88.0	40.3	83.0	17.7
Middle Secondary	78.9	29.2	80.5	33.3	76.8	29.0	17.7	12.9
Higher Secondary	68.7	24.4	68.2	27.3	73.7	25.7	66.8	12.4
Graduate & Above	56.7	19.6	48.8	21.6	71.3	70.6	60.8	12.4
	81.5	32.1	86.9	36.8	83.6	31.0	80.6	27.3

Source: Adapted from the Human Development Report 2005, Government of Kerala.

in the age group of 15-25 experience a high unemployment rate while this is true for the 15-30 age group for women (Government of Kerala,2006). Since the problem of unemployment in Kerala is basically one of educated unemployment, the incidence of such a phenomenon is more severe among the women as their enrolment is more in higher education in the state. The highest incidence of unemployment is among those with just secondary level of education, with rates well above 30 per cent throughout the last two decades. Women experience three times higher incidence of unemployment than this category of educated men. However, even among the highly educated women in Kerala (graduate and above), latest data reveals that worker participation rates were 37 per cent (urban) and 32 per cent (rural) compared with 87 per cent and 82 per cent, respectively, for men. Further, gender disparity in levels of educated employment (ratio of male graduate WPR to female graduate WPR) has widened from 2.0 to 2.4 in the 1990s (Government of Kerala,2006).

Women in Decision making bodies of Higher education in Kerala

Empowerment of women is said to happen only when the women occupy positions in the decision making bodies. Though Kerala has implemented 50 per cent reservations in the Local Self Governing Institutions in its decision making bodies since the last election, there is no such practice in the realm of higher education. In the Senate, Syndicate and Academic Councils of the Universities, the representations of women are abysmally low. When we analyse the top positions in the Universities in the state, it is mostly male centric. For example, only in one University out of 11 universities in Kerala, we have a women Vice Chancellor. Similarly, only in one University we have a women Pro-Vice Chancellor. In none of the Universities in Kerala, we have

women Registrars. Similar is the case with the Principals of Colleges. Only a few colleges prefer women as their principals. This is a neglected area of concern, as the root cause of disempowerment of women lies in their lack of participation in decision making bodies. There is no dearth of qualified women leaders in Kerala. Still, the plight of the highly educated women in the state is a sort of marginalization when it comes to the matter of appointment at the highest decision making bodies.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

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Education is recognized as one of the critical elements of the national development effort and Higher education, in particular, is of vital importance for the nation, as it is a powerful tool to build knowledge-based society of the 21st century. Knowledge has always been a distinguishing characteristic of human beings in view of their unique capacity to formulate and continuously transmit knowledge from one generation and location to another. In addition, education is an empowering tool for the marginalized, especially for the women. In a situation where the women are mostly exploited and abused, their emancipation is possible only through a well conceived education system. There has been a phenomenal growth in the number of women enrolled in higher education since independence. Women enrolment was less than 10 percent of the total enrolment on the eve of independence and it has risen to 42 per cent by now.

Kerala's experiments in the education in general and higher education in particular has seen unprecedented expansion during the last few decades. Commensurate with the expansion, the enrolment of the students has also grown. Gender-wise distribution of the enrolment reveals that women constitute a significant portion of the formal education segment of the state. In the sphere of higher education in the country, Kerala has the distinction of having the highest women enrolment during 2011-12. This is an indication of the gender sensitization and gender equality in the field of education. However, if we examine the programme wise distribution of the enrolment of the higher education, we can see that the women are over represented in Arts and Science programmes, while their participation in professional programmes are less than their proportion in the total population of Kerala. Similarly, the participation of women in decision making bodies of higher education also lead us to conclude that gender equity is not practiced in the State.

While education is considered as a stepping stone for better work participation rate, the experience of Kerala do not lend support to this correlation. The work participation rate of women in both the rural and urban areas is lower

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than their male counterpart. These are all indications of women marginalization in the model state of Kerala. From these discussions, the following suggestions are mooted to make the Kerala model of women empowerment through higher education meaningful:

1. Special efforts should be made to enhance the participation of women in the professional education.
2. Educated Women are found employed mainly in teaching and clerical cadre in our state economy and hence special focus should be given to place them on a sound footing in every field of economic activity.
3. The work participation rate of the women, especially the educated women, should be raised substantially to reduce their educated unemployment.
4. The State has to increase the participation of women in higher education management including in faculty, administration and staff for better gender balance, to sensitize the higher education system through policies and procedures which recognize gender equity and to involve women capable of becoming administrators.
5. The opening of a Women's University in Kerala is a dire necessity as women constitute the highest in enrolment and also the state is unique for its favorable sex ratio.
6. Focused programmes should be framed for promoting research among the women as they have domestic and familial issues more than their male counterpart.
7. Finally, more Departments of Women Studies should be started in the existing universities and colleges with special focus on women's issues.

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