

Challenges Faced By Women Faculty Members At The Workplace: Indian Higher Educational Institutions

Prof. (Dr.) Sanjay Kumar¹, Shashant Kashyap^{2*}

¹Professor, Department of Sociology, N.A.S. College Meerut, U.P. India

²SRF (Ph.D. Scholar), Department of Sociology, N.A.S. College Meerut, U.P. India

Abstract

This research paper explores the multifaceted challenges encountered by women faculty members in higher educational institutions in India. Despite the growing participation of women in academia, they continue to face systemic barriers such as gender discrimination, unequal access to leadership roles, research limitations, and the burden of balancing professional and domestic responsibilities. The study is based entirely on secondary data, including reports, academic articles, and institutional records. It highlights how patriarchal norms, institutional biases, and inadequate support systems continue to obstruct the career progression and job satisfaction of women educators. The paper also examines intersectional issues, where factors like caste, class, and religion further intensify these challenges. Through a comprehensive review of literature and policy analysis, the study identifies key areas needing reform. It concludes with practical suggestions such as the implementation of gender-sensitive policies, improved grievance redressal systems, mentorship programs, and gender audits. The research aims to contribute to policy discourse and institutional practices that promote gender equity, inclusivity, and empowerment of women in higher education.

Keyword: Workplace Challenges, Gender Inequality, Faculty, Higher Educational Institutions, Social Transformation

INTRODUCTION

In the modern world, education serves as the cornerstone of societal development, contributing not only to intellectual growth but also to social transformation. Higher education, in particular, plays a pivotal role in shaping human capital, promoting innovation, and building a knowledge-based economy. Within this framework, the participation of women in higher educational institutions has seen a considerable rise over the past few decades. Women have made significant contributions as educators, researchers, administrators, and leaders. However, despite their growing presence, women faculty members continue to face a multitude of challenges at the workplace—challenges that are deeply rooted in societal norms, institutional structures, and gender-based expectations. The issue of gender inequality in the academic workforce is not unique to India. Globally, studies have consistently pointed out that women in academia are underrepresented in senior positions and often subjected to various forms of direct and indirect discrimination. In the Indian context, the problem becomes more complex due to the intersectionality of gender with socio-cultural expectations, family responsibilities, and institutional limitations. Higher education institutions, which are ideally expected to be progressive and egalitarian, often mirror the biases and stereotypes prevalent in the broader society.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study aims to explore and understand the multidimensional challenges faced by women faculty member's in Indian higher educational institutions. The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To identify the major workplace challenges faced by women faculty in higher education.
2. To analyze the impact of gender roles and stereotypes on their professional life.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study seeks to investigate the lived experiences of women faculty in higher educational institutions with a focus on the challenges they face. The research will be guided by the following key questions:

1. What are the key professional challenges faced by women faculty in higher education?
2. How do social norms and gender expectations affect their academic roles?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is descriptive and analytical in nature and is based solely on secondary data sources. It aims to explore the various challenges faced by women faculty members in higher educational institutions through an in-depth review and analysis of existing literature and institutional reports.

This research does not involve any fieldwork or primary data collection. Instead, it draws from a wide range of secondary sources, including government publications, educational surveys, policy documents, scholarly articles, research reports, and academic books. Key sources include the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2023-24, reports from the University Grants Commission (UGC) 2019, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, and relevant documents from organizations such as UNESCO, United Nation Women, and the Ministry of Education, Government of India.

Scholarly journals such as the *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, *Women Studies Economic and Political Weekly*, and *Sociological Bulletin* have been reviewed to gather diverse perspectives and empirical findings related to gender issues in academia. Books and research studies by sociologists, educationists, and feminist scholars have been used to frame the theoretical background and understand the structural factors influencing women's experiences in higher education.

The data has been analyzed using qualitative content analysis to identify recurring themes, patterns, and issues related to workplace discrimination, leadership gaps, work-life balance, and institutional support systems. The study adopts a sociological lens to interpret the findings, particularly focusing on patriarchy, gender role theory, and institutional structures.

Since this study relies exclusively on secondary data, all information is documented and interpreted within the context of previously published and verified research. Proper citations and references are maintained throughout the study to ensure academic credibility and ethical integrity.

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

From a sociological standpoint, the challenges faced by women faculty are not isolated incidents but part of a larger social structure rooted in patriarchy, power imbalance, and traditional gender roles. The academic institution, while appearing neutral, often functions as a site of gendered power relations. The expectations placed on women in terms of behavior, appearance, and performance reflect broader societal norms and stereotypes. Intersectionality also plays an important role. Women from marginalized communities—such as those belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, or religious minorities—face compounded discrimination based on both gender and social identity. Their experiences are shaped not only by institutional practices but also by social hierarchies, exclusion, and discrimination.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The participation of women in higher education has significantly increased over the years. However, their experiences as faculty members remain shaped by systemic challenges, gender bias, and institutional inequalities. A wide range of national and international literature highlights the persistence of gender-based disparities in academia. This section reviews scholarly work, government reports, and institutional studies that examine the workplace challenges faced by women faculty in higher educational institutions.

UNESCO (2019) notes that even in countries where gender parity in student enrollment has been achieved, women faculty still face limited access to leadership positions. The gender gap is particularly visible in STEM disciplines and administrative roles within universities.

Bhatia, K (2019) found that many women reported facing gendered expectations from both peers and students, such as being expected to be more nurturing or conform to particular dress codes and behavior patterns.

Mukhopadhyay, S (2018) argues that unless academic institutions adopt a gender mainstreaming approach—embedding gender sensitivity into every aspect of functioning—progress will remain superficial and fragmented.

Sen and Dhawan (2016) found that many women faculty members hesitate to report harassment due to fear of victimization, lack of confidentiality, or concerns over career implications. This points to a broader institutional culture that is often indifferent or dismissive toward women's concerns.

Chakravarty, S (2014), it was found that women faculty in India often struggle to devote time to research and administrative responsibilities due to domestic duties, which are rarely shared equally.

Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 mandates institutions to form Internal Complaints Committees (ICC), many institutions either lack such mechanisms or do not implement them effectively.

Goel and Kaur (2012), while women constitute a large portion of the teaching staff at the entry-level, their presence significantly diminishes as one moves up the academic hierarchy. The "leaky pipeline" phenomenon, where women gradually exit the academic system due to various pressures, continues to be a critical concern.

Rao and Nair (2011) suggest that institutional mentorship programs, particularly those aimed at supporting women, can play a vital role in improving their academic performance and confidence.

Deshpande and Patwardhan (2010) argue that societal expectations still place the primary responsibility of caregiving and household chores on women, regardless of their professional status. This results in increased stress, burnout, and sometimes a conscious choice to limit career growth.

Kapur and Mehta (2007) highlight that women faculty are often subject to both overt and subtle forms of gender discrimination. These include being overlooked for promotions, exclusion from decision-making processes, and receiving unequal pay or research funding. Women's competence is frequently questioned, and their contributions are undervalued.

The reviewed literature provides a strong foundation for understanding the various dimensions of challenges faced by women faculty members in higher educational institutions. While there is a growing awareness of gender disparities, meaningful change requires institutional reforms, accountability mechanisms, and a cultural shift towards inclusivity. This study aims to build upon the existing literature by incorporating field-based data and lived experiences of women educators, thereby contributing to both theory and practice.

Increasing Participation, Yet Limited Power

Women constitute a significant proportion of the teaching community in Indian higher education. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE 2023), nearly 42% of faculty members in universities and colleges are women. While this indicates an encouraging trend towards inclusivity, a deeper look reveals that women are largely concentrated in junior-level positions. Very few reach the level of full Professors, department heads, deans, or vice-chancellors. Leadership positions remain predominantly male-dominated, suggesting a glass ceiling that restricts women's upward mobility in academia. This underrepresentation is not due to lack of competence or commitment, but often due to structural and attitudinal barriers within academic institutions. Gender biases—both overt and subtle—affect recruitment, promotion, research opportunities, and leadership roles. The evaluation of women's work is often filtered through gendered lenses, and they are expected to prove themselves continually in ways their male counterparts are not.

Gendered Expectations and Work-Life Balance

One of the most prominent challenges faced by women faculty is the constant struggle to maintain a balance between their professional responsibilities and domestic roles. In most Indian households, women are expected to shoulder the primary responsibility for caregiving and household duties. This double burden often results in physical and emotional exhaustion, which in turn affects their productivity and career progression. Unlike male faculty, women often have to make trade-offs between career advancement and family obligations, particularly during critical phases of their professional lives—such as pursuing a Ph.D., applying for promotions, or taking on administrative roles. Work-life balance becomes even more difficult in institutions that lack gender-sensitive policies like maternity leave, childcare facilities, flexible working hours, or remote work options. These institutional gaps often force women to either exit the workforce temporarily or settle for positions with limited growth potential.

Discrimination and Biases in the Academic Workplace

Discrimination in academia is often subtle and institutionalized. Women faculty members are more likely to be assigned heavy teaching loads and less likely to receive support for research or conference travel. They may be excluded from important decision-making committees or not considered for prestigious assignments. Male dominance in academic networks also limits women's access to mentorship, collaborations, and funding opportunities. In many cases, their achievements are downplayed, and they face greater scrutiny for their professional decisions. Sexual harassment and hostile work environments are another serious concern. Despite the existence of laws like the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, many institutions lack robust and transparent mechanisms to address complaints. The fear of backlash or being labeled as a troublemaker often discourages women from reporting such incidents.

Research and Professional Development Barriers

While teaching remains the primary responsibility of faculty members, research is a key criterion for academic promotions and recognition. However, women faculty members often struggle to meet research expectations due to time constraints, lack of institutional support, and limited access to research funding. Since much of their time is consumed by teaching, administrative work, and family duties, they get less time to focus on publishing, attending conferences, or pursuing funded research projects. This creates a cycle where women fall behind in metrics used to evaluate academic performance, further affecting their chances of promotion. Moreover, mentorship opportunities for women in research are limited. In male-dominated departments, women may not find senior female mentors to guide them through academic pathways, negotiate workplace challenges, or advocate for their advancement.

Leadership and Decision-Making

Leadership roles in academia—such as department chairs, deans, members of academic councils, or vice-chancellors—are essential for influencing institutional policy and culture. However, women's representation in these roles remains disproportionately low. This lack of visibility in leadership not only affects policy decisions but also reduces the presence of role models for younger women faculty and students. The reasons behind this are manifold. Women are often overlooked for such roles under the assumption that they may not be able to handle the added responsibility due to family obligations. Gender stereotypes such as "women are too emotional for leadership" or "men are better decision-makers" continue to pervade selection processes, even if unconsciously.

Institutional Culture and Support Systems

The culture within higher educational institutions can either facilitate or hinder the growth of women faculty. A supportive and inclusive environment that values diversity and actively works to eliminate gender bias can significantly improve women's experiences and outcomes. However, many institutions still lack formal gender equity policies, diversity training, or platforms for women to voice their concerns. Even when such mechanisms exist, they are often ineffective due to lack of awareness, poor implementation, or fear of retaliation. The absence of accountability further normalizes discriminatory behavior and discourages women from seeking redressal.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

While there is increasing awareness about gender issues in academia, comprehensive studies focusing specifically on the lived experiences of women faculty in Indian higher education are limited. Existing literature often presents statistical data but fails to capture the nuanced and subjective experiences of women. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring the challenges faced by women faculty through a sociological lens, giving voice to their struggles, analyzing the institutional framework, and suggesting ways to create a more inclusive academic environment.

The findings of this research will not only contribute to academic discourse but also have practical implications for policy-making, institutional reform, and the promotion of gender equity in higher education. Understanding these challenges is the first step toward addressing them, and empowering women faculty is essential for building robust, progressive, and equitable educational institutions.

SUGGESTIONS

To address the challenges faced by women faculty in higher educational institutions, it is essential to implement gender-sensitive policies that ensure fair recruitment, promotions, and leadership opportunities. Institutions should strengthen Internal Complaints Committees (ICC) to address workplace harassment with transparency and confidentiality. Providing flexible work hours, maternity leave, on-campus childcare, and support for work-life balance can greatly ease the dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities. Efforts must be made to increase women's participation in decision-making roles and leadership positions through mentorship and empowerment programs. Regular gender sensitization workshops for faculty and staff can help build an inclusive and respectful institutional culture. Additionally, conducting periodic gender audits and making institutional data publicly available will improve transparency and accountability. Together, these measures can create a more equitable and supportive academic environment for women faculty members.

CONCLUSION

The participation of women in higher educational institutions has seen a significant rise in recent decades. However, this quantitative increase does not necessarily translate into qualitative equality. Women faculty members continue to face multifaceted challenges that hinder their academic growth, leadership aspirations, and overall professional satisfaction. These challenges range from gender-based discrimination, limited access to decision-making roles, and research barriers to deep-rooted socio-cultural expectations and work-life imbalance. The secondary data reviewed in this study reveal that women are often overburdened with teaching and administrative responsibilities, leaving little time for research and academic development. The institutional culture, though increasingly aware of gender equity, still reflects systemic biases and patriarchal norms. Furthermore, leadership positions in academia remain largely male-dominated, despite the presence of competent and capable women educators. Inadequate support systems, lack of mentorship, and weak grievance redressal mechanisms further aggravate the problem.

The study also underscores how societal expectations continue to place the responsibility of domestic and caregiving roles primarily on women, compelling many to compromise on their career progression.

Intersectional challenges faced by women from marginalized backgrounds—based on caste, class, or religion—make the issue even more complex. There is an urgent need for structural, cultural, and policy-level reforms to ensure a more inclusive and equitable environment for women faculty in higher education.

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