

Women's Access to Higher Education in Bihar: A Socioeconomic Evaluation

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Abstract

This article explores the socio-economic barriers that restrict women's access to higher education in Bihar, revealing how intersecting factors- poverty, patriarchal norms, inadequate infrastructure, and weak foundational education- create a systemic pattern of exclusion. Drawing on reports and analysis based on various all-India level surveys like AISHE, NFHS, and IHDS, it argues that educational disadvantage begins early and compounds over time, especially for marginalized caste groups. Although some government initiatives have increased school participation, the transition to higher education remains precarious. Low Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER), gender disparities, and poor institutional density reflect both policy inertia and structural neglect. The article concludes that meaningful change requires not just targeted schemes, but comprehensive reform in primary education, economic support systems, and the democratization of academic spaces for women.

Keywords: Women's Education, Bihar, Higher Education Access, Gender Inequality, Socioeconomic Barriers

1. Introduction: Between Aspiration and Exclusion

Bihar, a state emblematic of intricate socioeconomic disparities, presents a challenging landscape for women aspiring to access higher education. The journey of women towards college is not simply a question of institutional access- it reflects deeper historical and

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structural inequities woven into the state's cultural, economic, and policy architecture. For decades, Bihar has stood at the crossroads of aspiration and deprivation. Its daughters, often raised in households where resources are scarce and male children are prioritized, dream of classrooms and careers, but find their ambitions thwarted by an unforgiving terrain. Poverty remains a persistent adversary, with rural families frequently unable to afford school fees, let alone the costs of college. At the same time, entrenched patriarchal norms continue to govern decisions about girls' mobility, visibility, and purpose within society. These gendered expectations- of early marriage, domestic labour, and social silence- collide directly with the expansive horizon that higher education promises. Moreover, public policy, though not indifferent, has often fallen short of addressing the layered challenges rural and marginalized women face. Gaps in infrastructure, scarcity of female role models, and a lack of sustained, gender-sensitive educational reforms have only widened the chasm between what is imagined and what is attainable.

2. A Statistical Portrait: Numbers That Tell a Story

At the core of Bihar's higher education crisis lies its dismal Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) - a figure that captures how many young people (ages 18–23) are enrolled in colleges and universities. According to the *All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2019*, Bihar's GER stood at just 13.6%, the lowest in the country, compared to the national average of 26.3%.² For every 100 young adults in Bihar, only around 13 were pursuing tertiary education- a sobering statistic in a state with one of the largest youth populations in India.

More recent AISHE data for 2021–22 paints a marginally improved yet still inadequate picture: Bihar's GER rose from 15.9% in 2020–21 to 17.1% in 2021–22, while the

² Ritika Chopra, Higher education in Bihar: Young voters, but under most heads, a poor report, The Indian Express, Oct. 23, (2020) Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/elections/higher-education-in-bihar-young-voters-but-under-most-heads-a-poor-report-card-6847241/> (Last access on Feb 24, 2025).

Tamil Nadu Has The Highest Enrollment Rate In Higher Education, Bihar Has The Lowest, In 7 States Girls Outnumber Boys, Jan 06, 2018 <https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/tamil-nadu-has-the-highest-enrollment-rate-in-higher-education-bihar-has-the-lowest-in-seven-states-girls-outnumber-boys-337095.html> (Last access on Feb 24, 2025).

national average climbed to 28.4%.³ Though this progression is heartening, the gap between Bihar and the national average remains significant.

Within this aggregate figure, the participation of women is even more constrained. In 2019, female enrollment was about 12%, compared to 15% for male students, resulting in Bihar's Gender Parity Index (GPI) of 0.79, the lowest among all Indian states.⁴ A GPI of 0.79 implies that for every 100 male students engaged in higher education, only 79 women were enrolled- a stark illustration of entrenched gender imbalance.

Longitudinal analysis shows only modest gains as Bihar's GPI rose from 0.77 in 2010 to 0.92 by 2021, as per data compiled from AISHE and CEIC Data (CEIC)'s educational statistics.⁵ Beyond overall GER and GPI, disaggregated data reveals stark inequalities in social categories. As per AISHE 2021–22, the GER for Scheduled Caste (SC) women in Bihar was 9.7%, markedly lower than the overall female GER of 15.1%, while Scheduled Tribe (ST) women had a GER of 17.4% - all well below male GERs across these groups.⁶

The infrastructure underpinning higher education in Bihar is also worryingly thin. As of AISHE 2021–22, Bihar had just seven colleges per lakh eligible population, compared to a national average of 30 colleges per lakh.⁷ Each institution accommodates an average of 2,088 students - the highest student load per institution in India- compared to the national average of 789 students.⁸

³ Gross Enrolment Ratio increased in State, Times of India, Jan 28, 2024
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/gross-enrolment-ratio-in-state-increases-to-17/articleshow/107196800.cms> (Last access on Dec. 28, 2024).

⁴ All India Survey on Higher Education, AISHE, 2019–20 Report (English)
Available at: <https://aishe.gov.in/aishe-final-report/> (Last access on Dec. 28, 2024)

⁵ CEIC Data, Education Indicators for India,
Available at: <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/india/gender-parity-index-in-tertiary-education> (Last access on Dec. 21, 2024)

⁶ All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) Report 2021–22, Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, Table 47: Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) during last 5 years (T-47), Available at: <https://aishe.gov.in/>

⁷ Ritika Chopra, Higher education in Bihar: Young voters, but under most heads, a poor report, The Indian Express, Oct. 23, (2020)
Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/elections/higher-education-in-bihar-young-voters-but-under-most-heads-a-poor-report-card-6847241/> (Last access on Feb 24, 2025).

⁸ Gross enrolment ratio in state increased to 17%, Times of India, Jan 28, (2024)
Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/gross-enrolment-ratio-in-state-increases-to-17/articleshow/107196800.cms> (Last access on Feb 24, 2025).

Together, these figures- GER hovering between 15–17%, GPI stuck below parity, weaker access among marginalized categories, and sparse institutional density- compose a statistical narrative of systemic neglect. They betray not only low participation rates but also signify how educational exclusion is gendered and compounded by socioeconomic marginality.

While incremental gains signal hope- such as the slow rise in GPI over the past decade- the persistence of Bihar's low GER and deep gender disparities suggests that policy intentions have yet to translate into equitable outcomes. The numbers are not just dry statistics; they are markers of opportunity foregone, of entire cohorts of young women whose academic potential remains unrealized.

2.1. Early Educational Foundations: A Shaky Ladder

The educational exclusion that plagues women's access to higher learning in Bihar begins far before college- it takes root in childhood and adolescence, when the foundation of basic literacy and schooling remains perilously weak. In the silent alleys of Bihar's rural villages and the congested lanes of its towns, the barriers to women's education do not suddenly arise at the gates of a university- they are laid brick by brick in the early years of a girl's life. Higher education, for most girls in Bihar, is not a destination they choose to forgo- it is a journey they were never allowed to begin.

The denial begins subtly. A girl is often the last to be enrolled in school and the first to be withdrawn. While the boy child is encouraged to dream beyond the classroom, the girl is asked to keep her feet close to the hearth. Her schooling is seen as ornamental at best, dispensable at worst- especially when weighed against domestic chores, care work, and the looming expectation of marriage.

Even when girls are enrolled, the learning environment often discourages continuity. Inadequate infrastructure - schools without boundary walls, functional toilets, or safe commuting options- disproportionately affects adolescent girls.⁹ A 12-year-old girl

⁹ Amarnath Tewary, Low attendance, lack of toilets for girl students in Bihar government schools, says ASER report, *The Hindu*, Jan. 19, (2023)

walking three kilometers to school each day, facing taunts or threats, soon finds it easier to stay home. The lack of female teachers, menstrual hygiene management, and gender-sensitive pedagogy add to this attrition.¹⁰

2.2. Stunted Female Literacy in Bihar

The statistics are merely the bones of this story as only around 55% of women aged 15-49 in Bihar are literate, and fewer than 29% of girls above age six have completed 10 or more years of schooling.¹¹ In comparison, 76% of men in the same age group are literate, illustrating a stark gender divide of over 21 percentage points.¹² This gendered divergence in literacy is not a recent phenomenon; it is the result of a prolonged disregard for girls' education, both by the state and society. Some of research works also affirms that educational inequalities in states like Bihar cannot be addressed unless foundational schooling is radically reformed and made more accessible and inclusive.¹³ Without basic education, access to higher education remains a mirage.

Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/low-attendance-lack-of-toilets-for-girl-students-in-bihar-government-schools-says-aser-report/article66407818> (Last access on Sept.5th, 2025)

Santosh Singh, Missing buildings, shortage of classrooms, no toilets: Survey throws light on problems plaguing Bihar government schools, Indian Express, Aug. 5. (2023)

<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/patna/missing-buildings-shortage-toilets-survey-problems-plaguing-bihar-government-schools-8876213> (Last access on Sept.5th, 2025)

Satyajeet Kumar, At this Bihar school, girls drink less water so they don't need the toilet, India Today, Nov. 6, (2023)

<https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/news/story/at-this-bihar-school-girls-drink-less-water-so-they-dont-need-the-toilet-2458884-2023-11-06> (Last access on Sept.5th, 2025)

¹⁰ Dev Kumar Pandey, Frame rules to provide toilets, sanitary napkins to girls in schools: Patna HC, Times of India, April 13, (2023).

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/frame-rules-to-provide-toilets-sanitary-napkins-to-girls-in-schools-patna-hc/articleshow/99447334.cms>

Rachna Priyadarshini, In Bihar, menstrual hygiene still an obstacle for girls to attend school, 26 Sep, (2023) https://101reporters.com/article/education/In_Bihar_menstrual_hygiene_still_an_obstacle_for_girls_to_attend_school (Last access on Sept.5th, 2025)

¹¹ National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019-21: Bihar International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. 2021, pg. 61-62, (2021)

¹² Table 3.4.1 Respondent's level of schooling and literacy by state/union territory: Women, National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019-21: Bihar International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. 2021, pg. 93, (2021)

¹³ Sharmila Ray and Sakshi Saini, Efficacy of rights-based approach to education: A comparative study of two states of India, Policy Futures in Education, Sage Journals, Vol. 14(2), Dec. (2015).

Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1478210315618543> (Last access on March 22, 2025).

But the soul of this exclusion lies in a cultural psychology that sees female education not as a right, but as a gamble- one that might delay marriage, ‘spoil’ daughters, or yield no economic return. By the time these girls reach the age of eligibility for college, most have already fallen off the educational ladder. Their minds, capable of grasping calculus, literature, or law, have been repurposed toward unpaid domestic labor. Their academic curiosity- perhaps sparked once by a compassionate teacher or a borrowed book- is quietly extinguished by the weight of social expectations. They are not pushed out of college; they are never led in.

Thus, the exclusion is not an event, but a process- a slow erosion of possibility that begins with the first missed class, the first illness unattended, and the first insult unchallenged. When higher education is built upon early schooling, and that foundation is compromised by neglect and discrimination, it is little wonder that so few women cross the threshold of universities in Bihar.

2.3. Minimal Completion of 10+ Years of Schooling

The gap in educational attainment between women and men in Bihar is not merely a statistic to be archived in government reports- it is a lived reality that shapes the contours of women's lives and forecloses countless futures before they can begin to take form. Only 28.8% of women in Bihar have completed ten or more years of schooling, while 42.8% of their male counterparts have managed to do so.¹⁴ Only 10% of women in Bihar complete 10–11 years of school, and just 17% reach 12 or more years, compared to 13% and 23% of men, respectively.¹⁵ These numbers, as presented in the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019–21), echo a history of systemic deprivation and entrenched patriarchal norms that have operated over decades to deny women the right to education.¹⁶

¹⁴ National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019-21: Bihar, International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. 2021, pg. 62, (2021)

¹⁵ T.K. Rajalakshmi, NFHS-5 findings: The good, the bad & the ugly, Frontline, May 30 (2022). Available at: <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/public-health/the-good-the-bad-the-ugly-nfhs-5-report-documents-changes-in-india/article65463437.ece> (Last access on March 24, 2025).

¹⁶ National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019-21: Bihar International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. 2021, pg. 81, (2021)

The difference becomes even more unsettling when one looks beyond the borders of Bihar. Nationally, approximately 41% of women and 50.2% of men have completed ten or more years of schooling.¹⁷ The corresponding number for women of Bihar is nearly 12 percentage points lower than the national average - placing it among the worst-performing states in the country.¹⁸ The gap is not a matter of a few percentage points- it is the chasm between possibility and silence, between mobility and immobility, between a future opened and future denied. Many research works have repeatedly emphasized that the early years of schooling serve as a launch-pad for all higher intellectual pursuits. Without this elementary bedrock, one cannot speak of college, much less higher education.¹⁹ In Bihar, where almost three-fourths of girls never cross the Class 10 threshold, the idea of university becomes a fiction sustained only in textbooks and political speeches. The tragedy lies not merely in the failure of the system to support them, but in the societal compact that tolerates and even justifies this neglect. When the educational ladder itself is broken at its base, no amount of incentives at the top can bring equity. Such numbers do not merely map educational achievement- they narrate a cultural story of deprivation, caste-based marginalization, and deep-seated gender asymmetry.

2.4. Severe Urban–Rural Divide

The urban–rural divide further exacerbates the crisis. Literacy among women in urban Bihar is relatively better-nearly 75%- but in rural areas, where the majority of the population resides, it hovers around 54–55%. This disparity in access, as pointed out in a

¹⁷ National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019-21: Bihar International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. 2021, pg. 81, (2021)

¹⁸ T.K. Rajalakshmi, NFHS-5 findings: The good, the bad & the ugly, Frontline, May 30 (2022). Available at: <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/public-health/the-good-the-bad-the-ugly-nfhs-5-report-documents-changes-in-india/article65463437.ece> (Last access on Feb 24, 2025).

¹⁹ B. Bowman, M Donovan and M. Burns, eds. Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers, Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, National Research Council, National Academy Press, Washington, DC pg.7-8, (2001).
W. Barnett, Long-Term Effects of Early Childhood Programs on Cognitive and School Outcomes, The Future of Children, 5:3, pg.25-50 (1995).

comprehensive review by Factly Media and Research in 2022, reflects a complex interplay of infrastructural deficiencies, cultural limitations, and policy failures.²⁰

This is not an issue confined to rural or economically backward blocks alone. Even in semi-urban and urban parts of Bihar, the social conditioning that militates against girls' continued schooling is omnipresent. It manifests in the form of early marriage, the burden of household chores, and most of all, in the perception that education is expendable for women.

2.5. Childhood Dropout & Attendance Patterns

NFHS-5 data highlight that while 89% of children aged 6–14 in Bihar attend school, attendance plunges to just 69% among adolescents aged 15–17, with girls disproportionately affected as they transition into puberty and face growing marriage pressures.²¹ This steep decline signals a systemic failure to retain girls through the crucial upper-secondary years. Academic literature corroborates this trend. Studies report that adolescent girls often drop out due to the lack of gender-sensitive school infrastructure, such as separate toilets, and safety concerns *en route* to distant schools- compounded by norms that prioritize domestic labor or early marriage over education.²² Some studies argue that educational discontinuity at these stages creates irreversible loss in schooling trajectories and narrows potential pathways toward higher education. These multifaceted pressures explain why retention sharply diminishes for older girls, reinforcing Bihar's persistent gender gap in educational attainment.²³

²⁰ BharathKancharla, NFHS-5: Gender and Urban-Rural divide observed in access to School Education, Factly, Dec. 22, (2020). Available at: <https://factly.in/nfhs-5-gender-and-urban-rural-divide-observed-in-access-to-school-education/> (Last access on Feb 22, 2025).

²¹ National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019-21: Bihar, International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. 2021, pg. 6, (2021)

²² M. Venkatanarayana, Out-of-School Children: Child Labourers or Educationally Deprived? Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 39, No. 38, Pg. 4219-4221, Sep. 18-24, (2004)

²³ Pandey, N. and Saggurti, N., Great strides and persistent challenges: the evolving story of gender and education in Bihar, India: Findings from UDAYA longitudinal study. Policy Brief, Population Council, New Delhi, (2022)

2.6. Structural Constraints & Early Marriage

Rising school dropout rates among girls are linked not only to infrastructure deficits (e.g., lack of toilets, long distances) but also to gender norms. Only about 28.8 percent of women in Bihar have completed ten or more years of schooling, compared to 42.8 percent of men; however, these numbers only hint at a deeper crisis.²⁴ The decline in female attendance after puberty is tied not merely to missing classroom seats but to entrenched expectations-household chores, sibling care, long distances to school, and, critically, the pressure to marry early. In places like Supaul and Begusarai, over half of girls are married before turning 18, a reality that often ends their education prematurely and permanently.²⁵ NFHS-5 data confirm Bihar's prevalence of child marriage at nearly 40.8 percent, one of the highest in India, reinforcing the direct link between early marriage and dropout.²⁶ These structural constraints extinguish educational aspirations for many girls- once the social decision to marry is made, school becomes irrelevant.

2.7. Progress and Persistent Gaps

Male literacy in Bihar has indeed climbed- from around 71 percent in 2001 to approximately 76 percent by 2011, and further edging upward to 79.7 percent by 2017- yet women's literacy growth, though notable, has lagged significantly. Female literacy rose from a mere 33 percent in 2001 to 51.5 percent in 2011 and then to about 60.5 percent by 2017.²⁷ According to a 2025 review by Indian PSU, female literacy surged from just 37 percent in 2005 to 57 percent by 2019–20, yet men remained at

²⁴ National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019-21: Bihar, International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. 2021, (2021) Schemes help increase women literacy rate in Bihar, Times of India, Oct. 11, (2022). Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/schemes-help-increase-women-literacy-rate-in-bihar/articleshow/94774199> (Last access on Sept.05, 2025)

²⁵ Orusa Karim, Status of Secondary Education in Bihar: An Overview, Journal of Humanities and Education Development, Vol. 4(3): 229-236, (May 2022)

²⁶ According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-5, Bihar has the second-highest rate of child marriage in the country, following West Bengal. - National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5)- 2019-20, Available at: <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR375/FR375.pdf> (Last access on Feb 24, 2025)

Bihar govt forms 'task force' to prevent, eradicate child marriages; led by chief secretary, The Telegraph Online, 8th March, 2025,

Available at: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/bihar-govt-forms-task-force-to-prevent-eradicate-child-marriages-led-by-chief-secretary/cid/2087823> (Last access on Feb 24, 2025)

²⁷ Census of India, 2011, National Statistical Commission (2017)

roughly 76 percent, preserving a stubborn 20-point gender gap.²⁸ Various academic voices emphasize that while increased female literacy is commendable, the persistent literacy divide reflects systemic neglect and limited educational access for girls in rural and marginalized communities.²⁹ These disparities highlight how literacy gains have failed to achieve gender equity, illustrating the depth of Bihar's educational challenge.

3. Infrastructure Deficits and Structural constraints: When Distance Becomes Destiny

The geographical spread and institutional reach of higher education in Bihar further complicate the situation. The geographical terrain of Bihar casts a long shadow over women's higher education aspirations. With just seven colleges per lakh eligible population (age 18–23) - against a national average of thirty- Bihar is the worst performing state in terms of institutional density.³⁰ For young women in rural and semi urban areas, this scarcity translates into extreme travel distances that are neither safe nor affordable. In many households, especially conservative ones, the very act of commuting to a distant college becomes socially unacceptable or logistically impossible.

Despite this lack of proximity, average enrolment per college in Bihar reaches 2,088 students, almost three times the national average- intensifying overcrowding and straining quality.³¹ This compounds other structural hurdles. Such overcrowding often means fewer resources, less individual attention, and increased commute pressure for women, reducing the incentive or feasibility of attending college at all. Policy interventions like Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) aimed to improve regional equity in higher education access, but slow institutional roll-out and funding bottlenecks in Bihar have

²⁸ Indian PSU Desk, A Revolution Through Education — Bihar's Daughters Leading The Change, Indian PSU, 30 April (2025), available at: <https://indianpsu.com/a-revolution-through-education-bihars-daughters-leading-the-change/> (Last access on Sept.05, 2025)

²⁹ Manoj Kumar Tiwary, Unequal Access to Learning in Bihar: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives, *The Social Context of Learning in India*, *edi.* Manoj Kumar Tiwary et.al, Achievement Gaps and Factors of Poor Learning, (2003)

³⁰ Ritika Chopra, Higher education in Bihar: Young voters, but under most heads, a poor report card, *The Indian Express*, Oct. 23, 2020 <https://indianexpress.com/elections/higher-education-in-bihar-young-voters-but-under-most-heads-a-poor-report-card-6847241/> (Last access on Feb 24, 2025).

³¹ Just 7 colleges per 1 L eligible people, *The Times of India*, Jan 31, (2024)

Available at :

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/107277097.cms> (Last access on Feb 24, 2025).

hindered visible progress. Administrative apathy is further illustrated by the fact that many colleges in Bihar remain unreported in AISHE due to delayed data reporting, limiting further educational infrastructure expansion.³²

When geography meets gender expectations, the result is a system that systematically discourage Bihari girls the chance to pursue higher education. For them, the barriers are not academic but deeply structural- distance³³, safety, overcrowding, and mobility restrictions³⁴ that make college attendance not a matter of financial aid, but one of physical and social possibility.

4. Cultural Conditioning and Academic Choices

Social norms act as yet another silent architect of exclusion. A recent study Indian Institute of Technology Patna, published in *Language in India* and supported by the ICSSR, reveals that cultural stereotypes significantly influence women's academic trajectories in Bihar and Jharkhand. The curriculum and institutional environments consistently assign technical and scientific disciplines- like engineering and mathematics- as inherently 'masculine', while fields such as teaching, nursing, or humanities are seen as 'feminine', guiding girls away from STEM even when academic aptitude remains equal across genders.³⁵

³² Bihar edu institutions slow on uploading AISHE data, minister steps in, The Hindustan Times, Feb 09, (2022), Available at: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/patna-news/bihar-edu-institutions-slow-on-uploading-aishe-data-minister-steps-in-101644423706963.html> (Last access on April 7, 2025).

³³ Karthik Muralidharan and Nishith Prakash, Cycling to School: Increasing Secondary School Enrollment for Girls in India, American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, vol. 9 (3), pp321- 350, (2017). Available at: <https://www.iza.org/en/publications/dp/7585/cycling-to-school-increasing-secondary-school-enrollment-for-girls-in-india> (Last access on Feb 20, 2025).

³⁴ K. G. Santhya, R. Acharya, N. Pandey (et al.), Understanding the lives of adolescents and young adults (UDAYA) in Bihar, India, Population Council (2017) Available at: <https://www.projectudaya.in/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Bihar-Report-pdf.pdf>

³⁵ Sweta Sinha (et. al), Gender Stereotypes in the Higher Educational Institutions of Bihar and Jharkhand: Impact on Career Choices for Women, Language in India, Vol. 25, (2 Feb. 2025) Available at: <https://www.languageinindia.com/feb2025/debrajstereotypesfinal.pdf> (Last access on March 17, 2025).

Gender Bias still influences career paths of women in Bihar, Jharkhand: IIT-P study, Times of India, 7th July (2025). Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/gender-bias-still-influences-career-paths-of-women-in-bihar-jharkhand-iit-p-study/articleshow/122298912.cms> (Last access on July 14, 2025).

Sahoo and Klasen (2021), based on the IIM-B longitudinal dataset, demonstrate that girls are about 20 percentage points less likely than boys to select science or commerce streams in higher secondary schooling, regardless of abilities or previous performance.³⁶

The ideological roots of such division predate adolescence. Many school textbooks perpetuate these stereotypes through gendered narratives; the *Centre for Global Development* found that Indian textbooks frequently associate leadership and professions with men and domesticity with women, reinforcing biases early on.³⁷

These layered cultural conditions- from family attitudes to curriculum biases- shape educational choices long before college. Girls internalize limiting social scripts and often self-select away from aspirational streams. Even when high schools and universities admit female students, the academic and psychological conditioning they bring with them constrains their trajectory- making the fight for educational parity not just about infrastructure or policy, but deeply about dismantling gendered narratives embedded across generations.

5. Missing Women in Academia: The Question of Representation

Even in spaces where women do enter higher education, the experience remains one of marginality. Even when women in Bihar manage to enter higher education institutions, their presence remains marginal compared to their male peers. According to AISHE 2018-19, only 21 percent of teaching staff in Bihar's colleges and universities are women, while a staggering 79 percent are men, giving Bihar the worst gender skew among all Indian states.³⁸ According to another report, through the Survey of Higher Education

³⁶ Soham Sahoo and Stephan Klasen, Gender Segregation in Education: Evidence From Higher Secondary Stream Choice in India, *Demography*, Vol. 58 (3): 987–1010 (2021). Available at: <https://read.dukeupress.edu/demography/article/58/3/987/172698/Gender-Segregation-in-Education-Evidence-From> (Last access on Feb 24, 2025).

³⁷ High incidence of gender bias in school textbooks: which Indian state is topping the chart, *Times of India*, Sept. 24, (2024), Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/education/news/high-incidence-of-gender-bias-in-school-textbooks-which-indian-state-is-topping-the-charts/articleshow/113398209.cms> (Last access on Feb 7, 2025).

³⁸ Telling Numbers: Teachers in higher education - gender skew highest in Bihar, *The Indian Express*, (Sept. 30, 2019).

(AISHE) it is being claimed that the female-to-male teacher ratio in Bihar is approximately 1 to 4, with male dominance particularly stark in both teaching and non-teaching roles.³⁹

The absence of visible female leadership in academia sends a subtle yet powerful message - that scholarly authority belongs to men. This structural invisibility becomes self-perpetuating- female students, encountering few role models in positions of influence, unconsciously internalize the limits placed on their own academic identities. The clustering of women in lower-tier roles- such as demonstrators, adjuncts, or temporary instructors- further entrenches a bifurcated academic hierarchy, where substantive intellectual control remains male-dominated.⁴⁰

This dearth of female faculty matters profoundly. Without role models or mentors who share their gendered experiences, young women often struggle to envision themselves in academic careers or leadership. The imbalance not only affects perceptions but also curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional culture, reinforcing gendered boundaries long before ambition can blossom into possibility. In Bihar, then, representation is not just symbolic- it underpins whether the idea of higher learning feels like an attainable dream or remains a silent, distant echo. This lack of visible female academic leadership perpetuates a subtle but powerful message- that knowledge creation and dissemination is not a woman's domain. Female students, surrounded by a scarcity of role models, internalize these boundaries.

6. Economic Impediments: Poverty, Priorities, and the Price of Learning

Bihar's persistently low economic capacity creates a formidable barrier for women aspiring to higher education. With a per capita monthly income of just ₹5,028- among the

Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/telling-numbers-teachers-in-higher-education-gender-skew-highest-in-bihar-6039408/> (Last access on Jan 21, 2025).

³⁹ Universities, Colleges Have More Male Teachers Than Females, Gap Highest in Bihar: HRD Survey, (Sept. 23, 2019), available at: <https://www.news18.com/news/india/universities-colleges-have-more-male-teachers-than-females-gap-highest-in-bihar-hrd-survey-2319209.html> (Last access on Feb 22, 2025).

⁴⁰ Sai Krishna Muthyanolla, Data: AISHE Report Reveals That Female Faculty More Clustered in Lower Ranks, While Men Dominate Top-Posts of Higher Education, Faculty, Feb 6, (2024). Available at: <https://factly.in/data-aishe-report-reveals-that-female-faculty-more-clustered-in-lower-ranks-while-men-dominate-top-posts-of-higher-education/> (Last access on Feb 12, 2025).

lowest in India- families endure severe financial constraints that restrict educational investment, especially for daughters.⁴¹ High dropout rates reflect this reality- while around 9% of children leave school at the primary level, a staggering 26.3% discontinue studies between Classes 9 and 12, where secondary completion is key to college entry.⁴²

Poverty exacerbates gendered educational exclusion. Only about 5% of rural women participate in paid employment, rendering girls economically dependent and deprioritized in educational spending⁴³; in these households, male siblings' schooling is often prioritized. With over one-third of families earning less than ₹6,000 per month⁴⁴, expenditure on daughters' college fees, transport, or accommodation is seen as unaffordable.

Unemployment compounds disillusionment as Bihar's youth unemployment rate is higher and for daily labor work they migrate to other states, whereas the unemployment in women is often even higher, discouraging families from viewing higher education as a viable path. In such a fiscal and labor market landscape, education for girls is not a priority but a luxury, dampening aspirations and limiting access to tertiary studies.

7. Policy Interventions and Their Limits

While Bihar's educational landscape remains difficult, several government initiatives have succeeded in lighting small beacons of hope. The Mukhya Mantri Balika Cycle Yojana, launched in 2006, provided bicycles to secondary school girls in Grade 9- addressing safety and travel distance barriers. In a rigorous evaluation work which was published via the International Growth Centre in American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, revealed a 32% increase in age-appropriate female enrollment, along with a

⁴¹ Bihar Economic Survey Report 2024-25, Available at: https://state.bihar.gov.in/finance/cache/12/07-Mar-25/SHOW_DOCS/Economic%20Survey%20Final%2022.02.2025%20%20English_11zon.pdf (Last access on Feb 24, 2025).

⁴² Bihar Economic Survey Report 2024-25, Available at: https://state.bihar.gov.in/finance/cache/12/07-Mar-25/SHOW_DOCS/Economic%20Survey%20Final%2022.02.2025%20%20English_11zon.pdf (Last access on Feb 24, 2025).

⁴³ Bihar Economic Survey Report 2024-25, Available at: https://state.bihar.gov.in/finance/cache/12/07-Mar-25/SHOW_DOCS/Economic%20Survey%20Final%2022.02.2025%20%20English_11zon.pdf (Last access on Feb 24, 2025).

⁴⁴ Bihar caste-based survey report, 2023, Detailed report published by GAD Government of Bihar on 07.11.2023

40% narrowing of the gender gap, and 18% and 12% increases in exam attendance and pass rates respectively.⁴⁵

Complementing this, the Mukhya Mantri Kanya Utthan Yojana provides up to ₹25,000 to unmarried girls passing Class 12 and ₹50,000 for those who complete graduation, disbursed via direct benefit transfer. Over its lifetime, it offers cumulative support of up to approximately ₹54,100 per girl from birth through graduation.⁴⁶ More recent funding announcements, backed by the state cabinet in June 2025, allocated ₹281 crore for hostels in engineering and polytechnic institutes, designed explicitly to support female students' access to higher education across districts.⁴⁷

Despite these advances, the transition from school to college remains fraught. Economic insecurity frequently dictates educational trajectories. The India Human Development Survey II (2011–12) exposed how constrained household budgets often prioritize sons' education over daughters', truncating girls' educational paths when finances are tight. Recent NGO field reports underscore that this mindset persists across rural Bihar.

These schemes, while impactful, face structural barriers. The bicycle program targets only secondary-level attendance, not college participation.⁴⁸ The Kanya Utthan scholarship assists with direct financial cost of education, yet many rural girls still lack nearby colleges or face logistical obstacles- safety, transport, hostel access- that cash alone cannot remove. Reports of low institutional density and overcrowded campuses further dampen participation.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Karthik Muralidharan and Nishith Prakash, *Cycling to School: Increasing Secondary School Enrollment for Girls in India*, *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, vol. 9 (3), pp321- 350, (2017). Available at: <https://www.iza.org/en/publications/dp/7585/cycling-to-school-increasing-secondary-school-enrollment-for-girls-in-india> (Last access on Feb 20, 2025).

⁴⁶ Bihar Government Increases Scholarship Amount For Class 12 Pass, Graduate Girl Students, NDTV.Com, (Feb. 3, 2021), Available at: <https://www.ndtv.com/education/mukhyamantri-kanya-utthan-yojana-bihar-government-increases-scholarship-amount-2362496> (Last access on Feb 24, 2025).

⁴⁷ Cabinet OKs key projects, social schemes, Times of India, (June 24, 2025), Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/cabinet-oks-key-projects-social-schemes/articleshow/122052879.cms> (Last access on July 14, 2025).

⁴⁸ Uma Vishnu, *Two decades ago, Nitish distributed cycles to girls in Class 9. Where are they now?*, *Indian Express*, Nov. 12, (2025). Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/long-reads/two-decades-ago-nitish-distributed-cycles-to-girls-in-class-9-where-are-they-now-10360460/lite/>

⁴⁹ 'Just 7 colleges per 1L eligible people', *Times of India*, Jan 31, (2024) <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/just-7-colleges-per1l-eligible-people/articleshow/107277097.cms>

Ultimately, while these policies have demonstrated promise- in raising enrollment, reducing dropouts, and incentivizing girls to pursue education- their reach is constrained by gaps in infrastructure, persistent poverty, and social norms. Without a holistic ecosystem- linking scholarship, transport, local colleges, safe hostels, and cultural change- many girls complete secondary school but struggle to access higher learning, underscoring that policy gains must be buttressed by systemic reform and sustained socio-economic support.

Still, the leap from school to college remains precarious. One cannot ignore the role of economic insecurity in shaping the choices of women and their families. In households where food insecurity persists and male siblings' education is prioritized, investment in a daughter's college tuition is often seen as a luxury. The India Human Development Survey (IHDS-II, 2011–12) captured this dilemma vividly.⁵⁰ Though recent district-level data is scarce, reports from non-governmental organizations confirm that this dynamic continues.

8. Stories of Success: When Women Are Given a Chance

Yet, when these barriers are overcome, the academic excellence of Bihar's women shines through undimmed. At the 2024 Patna University convocation, for instance, 30 out of 43 gold medals were bagged by female students- a testament to what is possible when women are simply allowed the opportunity to thrive.⁵¹ This is not an isolated incident. At the newly established Bihar Engineering University, where one-third of all seats have been reserved for women, female students are beginning to reshape the academic

Higher education in Bihar: Young voters, but under most heads, a poor report card, Indian Express, Oct. 23. (2020), Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/elections/higher-education-in-bihar-young-voters-but-under-most-heads-a-poor-report-card-6847241>

⁵⁰ India Human Development Survey-II (IHDS-II), 2011-12 (ICPSR 36151), Available at: <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/DSDR/studies/36151/publications> (Last access on Feb 24, 2025).

⁵¹ Girls bag 30 gold medals out of 43 at PU convocation, Times of India, Nov. 30, (2024) Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/patna-university-convocation-girls-win-30-gold-medals-out-of-43/articleshow/115841283.cms> (Last access on May 3, 2025).

landscape. The university's recent record of timely result publication and impressive placement outcomes has offered hope for a more inclusive academic future.⁵²

9. The Road Ahead: Towards a Gender-Just Higher Education Framework

However, these green shoots cannot compensate for a landscape still marked by systemic neglect. The fundamental challenges remain structural. Until the government prioritizes the building of more colleges in under-served districts, invests in hostels and scholarships for women, and actively promotes female leadership in higher education governance, these successes will remain islands in an ocean of inequality.

In essence, women's access to higher education in Bihar is not just an educational issue- it is a socio-economic and cultural crucible, where the past, present, and future of gender equality converge. It speaks not merely of institutions and enrollments but of dreams deferred and dignity denied. The promise of higher education, particularly for the daughters of Bihar, lies not in policy declarations alone but in ensuring that no girl must choose between her gender and her growth.

10. Conclusion

The story of women's access to higher education in Bihar is a sobering reflection of deeply entrenched social, economic, and institutional inequities. It is not merely a tale of low numbers and skewed ratios but of aspirations stalled at the threshold of opportunity. This article has shown that educational exclusion for women is not the outcome of singular failures, but a culmination of overlapping disadvantages- poverty, patriarchal social norms, early marriage, weak foundational learning, inadequate infrastructure, and policy gaps. The data make clear that these barriers disproportionately affect women from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other marginalized groups, compounding their educational vulnerability.

⁵² BEU Declares result for BTech and PhD in record time, Times of India, June 30, (2025) Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/beu-declares-results-for-btech-and-phd-in-record-time/articleshow/122165217.cms> (Last access on July 14, 2025).

While schemes like the Mukhya Mantri Balika Cycle Yojana and Kanya Utthan Yojana offer glimmers of hope, they remain isolated interventions unless supported by broader, systemic reforms. There must be an urgent focus on improving foundational schooling, expanding institutional reach, and addressing cultural constraints on women's mobility and aspirations. Representation of women in academia must also be enhanced- not just in numbers but in leadership and decision-making roles- to create a more inclusive educational environment.

In essence, the challenge is not just to bring more women into colleges, but to reimagine the entire educational ladder- from the first rung to the top- so that it supports, rather than obstructs, their journey. Until then, the dream of higher education for Bihar's daughters will remain distant- real for a few, aspirational for many, and impossible for too many more.

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