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Higher Education and Women's Empowerment in Kolar: A Rural-Urban Study

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of higher education on women's empowerment in the Kolar district of Karnataka, India, focusing on the experiences of rural and urban women. The research used a mixed-methods approach, collecting data from 200 women aged 18-40, with an equal number of participants from both rural and urban areas. Key areas of inquiry included educational access, socio-cultural barriers, awareness of gender discrimination, decision-making roles, economic independence, and participation in public and private spheres. The findings show a positive correlation between higher education and women's empowerment. Urban women reported greater benefits from higher education, such as increased self-confidence, financial autonomy, and active involvement in household and community decision-making. They also demonstrated higher awareness of their legal and social rights. Rural women, despite their aspirations for personal growth, face significant challenges such as poor infrastructure, limited access to quality colleges, early marriage, and societal resistance to women pursuing higher education. The study identifies a rural-urban gap in educational opportunities and empowerment outcomes, rooted in deeper socio-cultural attitudes and economic limitations. To address these disparities, the study recommends enhancing educational infrastructure in rural areas, conducting gender-sensitization workshops, and integrating vocational training and life skills into the higher education curriculum. Partnerships between government bodies, NGOs, and educational institutions are crucial for promoting female participation in higher education.

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1. Introduction

The empowerment of women is a crucial aspect of sustainable development, particularly in emerging economies like India. Education, particularly higher education, is a potent tool for promoting empowerment, fostering economic independence, increasing self-confidence, and enhancing social mobility. However, Indian women still face significant disparities in access to education, employment opportunities, and societal respect. The All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2020-21 shows that while female enrolment in higher education has shown a gradual increase, stark differences persist between urban and rural areas and among different socio-economic groups. Women in rural India, especially in districts like Kolar in Karnataka, are disproportionately affected by systemic barriers such as poverty, traditional gender roles, infrastructural deficits, and early marriage.

Empowerment, as defined by the United Nations, is the process by which women gain power and control over their lives and acquire the ability to make strategic choices. Higher education contributes to improved self-esteem, awareness of rights, health-seeking behavior, and economic independence among women. It also helps challenge patriarchal structures by enabling women to question and resist gender-based discrimination. In urban settings, women have better access to colleges and universities, digital resources, and employment opportunities, as well as a more liberal social environment that supports women's mobility and self-expression. Rural women often struggle to complete secondary education or pursue higher studies due to traditional mindsets that prioritize early marriage and domestic roles.

This research aims to fill the gap by analyzing how higher education influences women's sense of agency, economic

participation, household decision-making power, awareness of rights, and social mobility, as well as the sociocultural and infrastructural barriers that prevent rural women from accessing the same level of educational and empowerment opportunities as their urban counterparts.

Background of the Study

India's Constitution guarantees equality before the law, non-discrimination on grounds of sex, and equal opportunities in public employment. However, women, especially from rural and underprivileged backgrounds, remain marginalized in terms of access to higher education, employment opportunities, and decision-making roles. Education is universally acknowledged as a cornerstone of empowerment, enhancing self-esteem, decision-making capacity, and economic participation.

The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) for women in higher education in India is 27.9%, slightly higher than that of men (26.7%). However, this national average masks stark rural-urban disparities. Urban women enjoy better access to colleges, transport, hostels, and career opportunities, while rural women often face multiple barriers such as distance to institutions, lack of female role models, safety concerns, domestic responsibilities, and conservative social attitudes.

Kolar district, located in the southeastern part of Karnataka, presents a microcosm of India's rural-urban educational divide. According to the Census 2011, Kolar has a total population of 15.36 lakhs, with around 72% living in rural areas. The overall literacy rate in the district is 74.33%, with a gender literacy gap of nearly 10%.

Barriers to higher education for rural women include socio-cultural norms, safety and mobility concerns, economic constraints, and institutional gaps. Urban women in Kolar benefit from a relatively progressive environment, better exposure to digital and English-language resources, and proximity to private colleges and skill-training centers. They are more likely to use education as a springboard for careers in teaching, government service, and the private sector. In contrast, rural women often view education as secondary to family responsibilities, leading to underemployment or unemployment due to a mismatch between educational qualifications and available local opportunities.

This study seeks to investigate the impact of higher education on the empowerment of rural and urban women in Kolar district by understanding how educational access, quality, and social context influence empowerment indicators such as employment, mobility, self-confidence, health choices, and legal awareness. Existing studies tend to generalize findings across broader rural-urban categories, missing micro-level insights that could guide more localized interventions. By focusing on both statistical analysis and field narratives, this study intends to offer evidence-based recommendations for improving higher education access and outcomes for women in rural Kolar.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between higher education and women's empowerment has been a topic of discussion in global development discourse. Studies have shown that higher education enhances women's self-awareness, autonomy, and capacity to influence familial and societal structures. Education not only equips women with economic tools but also challenges dominant ideologies that perpetuate gender discrimination.

The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2022) found that every additional year of schooling for girls reduces the likelihood of child marriage by 6.5% in developing countries. Girls with access to secondary and tertiary education are more likely to have control over reproductive choices and income-generating opportunities. Digital inclusion and vocational skill development are essential in linking education to empowerment.

National Level

In India, the association between higher education and women's empowerment is extensively studied within the development and gender literature. However, several researchers point out that the benefits of education are not uniform and often depend on socio-economic, cultural, and geographic factors. In India, urban, upper-class women continue to benefit the most from higher education, while women in rural and marginalized communities face systemic exclusions.

A study by Desai and Andrist (2010) using data from the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) found that higher education significantly improves women's bargaining power in households, particularly in terms of mobility, financial decision-making, and reproductive autonomy. They also observed that the impact is greater in urban settings due to better infrastructure and exposure.

Nirantar (2015) reported that even when girls from rural backgrounds attain a degree, they often struggle to find employment due to skill mismatches, safety concerns, and gendered labor market expectations. The All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2020–21 reported a gender parity index (GPI) of 1.05 at the undergraduate level, indicating that more women than men are enrolled in higher education nationwide. However, rural areas still lag in terms of institutional availability, student retention, and participation in STEM fields.

State Level

In Karnataka and Kolar District, women's access to education has improved, particularly due to state-level policies such as Vidya Siri, Ksheera Bhagya, and Savitribai Phule scholarships. However, rural-urban disparities continue to persist. A study by Sowmya and Manjula (2019) found that girls in rural areas drop out more frequently due to infrastructural challenges, such as lack of hostels, inadequate transport, and poor sanitation facilities.

A field-based study by K.R. Kavitha (2017) examined the empowerment of women graduates in Kolar and found that urban women were more likely to be employed and assertive in household decisions, while rural women were often unable to convert education into empowerment due to lack of supportive ecosystems. Another recent survey conducted by the Department of Collegiate Education, Karnataka (2023) indicated that only 18% of rural girls in Kolar enroll in higher education, compared to 45% of urban girls.

3. Research Gap

The research gap in India's higher education sector is significant, particularly in semi-urban and rural belts like Kolar. Most existing literature takes a national or state-level perspective, neglecting localized socio-economic and cultural variations. Kolar's unique blend of agrarian rural communities and emerging urban centers presents a compelling case to investigate how location-specific factors influence women's access to higher education and empowerment. Previous

studies often generalize empowerment outcomes without addressing the deep impact of availability, quality, and perception of higher education in different geographic contexts. This study aims to address this gap by analyzing access and outcomes in Kolar's rural and urban areas.

4. Study Objectives

- Assess role of higher education in empowering women in Kolar district.
- Compare access to higher education between rural and urban women.
- Suggest measures to enhance educational infrastructure and sensitization in rural areas.
- Understand impact of higher education on gender discrimination awareness and women's roles.

5. Hypotheses

- Higher education significantly enhances women's empowerment.
- Urban women have greater access to higher education.
- Awareness of gender discrimination correlates positively with education level.

6. Research Methodology

The research methodology serves as the blueprint for the systematic investigation of how higher education impacts the empowerment of women in Kolar district, with a particular focus on the rural-urban divide. This section outlines the design, approach, sampling strategy, tools, variables, and analytical methods used to conduct the study effectively.

6.1 Research Design: Descriptive and Analytical

This study employs a descriptive and analytical design. The descriptive aspect helps in outlining the current status of women's education and empowerment in both rural and urban regions of Kolar. The analytical component is used to assess the relationships between higher education and various empowerment indicators such as economic independence, decision-making ability, and awareness of gender rights.

Descriptive research provides statistical insights into how many women have access to higher education, while the analytical angle identifies patterns and causality-i.e., how and why education leads to empowerment.

6.2 Research Approach: Mixed-Method

A mixed-method approach is adopted to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. This involves:

- **Quantitative Analysis** through structured questionnaires administered to 200 women (100 rural and 100 urban).
- **Qualitative Insights** through in-depth interviews with selected participants to explore personal narratives, attitudes, and social contexts.

The integration of both methods enhances the reliability of findings, validates quantitative data through personal experiences, and uncovers dimensions of empowerment that cannot be captured numerically alone.

Population and Sample

The target population comprises women aged between 18 and 40 years residing in the Kolar district who have completed at least higher secondary education. This age range was chosen to include both current students and recent graduates who are either pursuing or have recently completed higher education.

Sample Size: 200 Women

A total of 200 women were selected for this study:

- 100 women from rural areas of Kolar district, representing different taluks with varying access to educational institutions.
- 100 women from urban areas, specifically from educational hubs like Kolar city and Malur, where facilities are comparatively better.

This sample size provides a reasonable representation of the target population while allowing meaningful statistical analysis.

Sampling Method: Stratified Random Sampling

To ensure representativeness and reduce sampling bias, stratified random sampling was used. The population was divided into two strata: rural and urban. Within each stratum, women were randomly selected from various colleges, community centers, self-help groups, and local women's organizations.

Stratification ensures that the specific experiences of rural and urban women are equally captured and allows for direct comparison between the two groups.

Data Collection Tools

Two primary tools were used for data collection:

a) Structured Questionnaire

The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions and was divided into the following sections:

- **Demographic Profile:** Age, marital status, family income, etc.
- **Educational Background:** Level of education attained, stream of study, type of institution.
- **Empowerment Indicators:** Employment status, decision-making power, awareness of rights, participation in community activities, etc.
- **Perception of Gender Discrimination:** Experiences at home, educational institutions, and workplaces.

The questionnaire was prepared in both English and Kannada to ensure clarity and inclusiveness.

b) In-depth Interviews

To supplement survey data, 15 in-depth interviews (8 rural, 7 urban) were conducted with women who had strong or weak empowerment outcomes. The interviews explored:

- Personal experiences in accessing education.
- Family support or opposition.
- Perceived changes in their confidence, status, and independence.
- Cultural and institutional barriers.

These narratives provided contextual richness to the data and highlighted nuanced perspectives that structured questions might overlook.

7. Key Variables

a) Independent Variable

- **Level of Education:** This includes the highest academic qualification attained by the respondents, categorized as:
 - Pre-university (PUC)
 - Undergraduate degree
 - Postgraduate degree
 - Professional/vocational training

b) Dependent Variables: Empowerment Indicators

These are categorized into three domains:

1. Economic Empowerment

- Employment status

- Income generation capability
- Financial decision-making

2. Social Empowerment

- Mobility and freedom
- Participation in family/community decisions
- Access to information and services

3. Psychological Empowerment

- Self-confidence
- Leadership skills
- Perception of equality

Each indicator was measured using a Likert scale and then analyzed collectively to derive empowerment scores.

8. Data Analysis Methods

- **Quantitative Data:** The responses were coded and analyzed using statistical software (e.g., SPSS/Excel). Techniques such as frequency distribution, mean comparison, and ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) were

used to determine significant differences between rural and urban women's empowerment levels based on their education.

- **Qualitative Data:** Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. Recurring patterns and themes—such as societal support, resistance, aspirations, or obstacles—were identified and grouped under relevant empowerment dimensions.
- **Triangulation:** To ensure validity, triangulation was employed by cross-verifying quantitative findings with qualitative insights.

9. Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants.
- Confidentiality of responses was maintained.
- Interviews were voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any stage.

Table 1: ANOVA Results Based on 10 Key Questions by Education Level

Q. No.	Survey Question	Empowerment Type	Education Levels	Mean Score	F-value	p-value	Significance
Q. No.	Survey Question	Empowerment Type	Education Levels	Mean Score	F-value	p-value	Significance
Q1	What is your highest level of education?	— (Independent Variable)	PUC/UG/PG/Vocational	—	—	—	—
Q2	Do you participate in household decision-making?	Social Empowerment	PUC → PG	2.8 → 4.2	9.21	0.0001	Significant
Q3	Are you employed or financially independent?	Economic Empowerment	PUC → PG	2.6 → 4.3	11.34	0.0000	Highly Significant
Q4	Have you experienced gender discrimination?	Social Awareness	PUC → PG	3.9 → 2.6 ↓	6.88	0.0013	Significant
Q5	How confident are you in public speaking or leadership roles?	Psychological Empowerment	PUC → PG	2.7 → 4.1	8.56	0.0002	Significant
Q6	Do you believe education improved your status in your family?	Social Empowerment	PUC → PG	3.1 → 4.4	10.02	0.0001	Significant
Q7	Do you feel safe commuting to college/workplace?	Social & Mobility Freedom	PUC → PG	3.0 → 4.0	7.16	0.0008	Significant
Q8	Are you aware of your legal rights as a woman?	Psychological Awareness	PUC → PG	2.5 → 4.2	12.75	0.0000	Highly Significant
Q9	Do you aspire to pursue higher education beyond your current level?	Psychological Empowerment	PUC → PG	3.2 → 4.6	8.01	0.0004	Significant
Q10	What changes would you suggest to improve rural education? (<i>Open-ended, coded</i>)	Social/Educational Attitude	PUC → PG	3.0 → 4.3	6.34		

Mean Scores were measured on a 5-point Likert scale:

1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree/Very High

Interpretation of the Table

- All questions show a statistically significant difference in responses based on education level.
- PG degree holders score higher on almost all empowerment dimensions, especially awareness (Q8), financial independence (Q3), and family status (Q6).
- Lower-educated groups (PUC) show reduced awareness and lower confidence, highlighting a critical need for educational access and sensitization in rural areas.

Table 2: ANOVA Results Comparing Empowerment Scores by Level of Education

Empowerment Indicator	Education Level	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	F-Value	p-Value	Significance
Economic Empowerment	PUC (12th)	3.1	0.68	7.54	0.0003	Significant
	UG Degree	3.8	0.71			
	PG Degree	4.3	0.60			
	Vocational Course	3.6	0.69			
Social Empowerment	PUC (12th)	2.9	0.72	6.12	0.0012	Significant
	UG Degree	3.6	0.67			
	PG Degree	4.1	0.59			
	Vocational Course	3.5	0.70			

Psychological Empowerment	PUC (12th)	3.0	0.65	8.45	0.0001	Significant
	UG Degree	3.9	0.60			
	PG Degree	4.4	0.58			
	Vocational Course	3.7	0.62			

Interpretation

- **F-value:** Measures the variation between group means relative to variation within groups.
- **P-value<0.05:** Indicates statistically significant differences in empowerment scores across education levels.
- **Result:** Women with higher education (especially PG degree holders) consistently report higher empowerment in all three domains-economic, social, and psychological-compared to those with only PUC.

Discussion

The study, involving 200 women in Kolar district, found a strong correlation between higher education and women's empowerment. The data was analyzed using a structured questionnaire and in-depth interviews, revealing consistent and statistically significant trends across different education levels, indicating a positive correlation between education and empowerment.

1. Economic Empowerment

The study found a significant association between education level and economic empowerment indicators. Women with postgraduate degrees were more likely to be employed, financially independent, and engaged in income-generating activities than those with only postgraduate education. Higher education enhances job readiness, access to skilled employment, and economic mobility. Vocationally trained women reported moderate empowerment, suggesting that even non-academic forms of education can boost financial independence. However, vocational training in rural areas was often limited to gendered skills, restricting women's entry into broader economic sectors. The findings support the importance of expanding quality education to rural women to break intergenerational poverty cycles.

2. Social Empowerment and Participation

The study found significant differences in education levels among women, with PG-educated women scoring above 4.0 in household decision-making, family status, and mobility. This suggests that education equips women with knowledge and confidence to assert themselves within patriarchal family structures. Urban women often negotiate career decisions with family members and contribute to sibling education, while rural women often lack such bargaining power. Urban women's empowerment is more pronounced due to supportive socio-cultural infrastructure like transport, institutions, and peer networks. Rural women who attain PG degrees often face social stigma and familial resistance. However, completing higher education transforms their position in the family from dependent to advisor, disrupting traditional power hierarchies and fostering greater respect. These findings align with Amartya Sen's "capability approach," suggesting that education enhances women's freedom to choose and act, expanding their opportunities for social participation.

3. Psychological Empowerment

Women with higher education consistently score 4.0 or above on confidence, leadership, and awareness of legal rights, with

legal awareness having the strongest F-value (12.75). Education introduces women to gender equality concepts, constitutional protections, and platforms like legal aid and grievance cells. PG women are more articulate about workplace rights, property claims, and anti-harassment mechanisms. A psychological shift was evident in responses to Q9 (aspiration for higher education), with PG women showing continued motivation for growth compared to those with basic qualifications. This demonstrates that education not only provides tools but builds inner agency, a core component of psychological empowerment. The results support UNESCO's view that education is a prerequisite for autonomy and feminist theorists like Nussbaum.

4. Gender Discrimination and Awareness (Q4)

A study found that women with lower education levels reported higher instances of perceived discrimination, while those with higher education reported fewer experiences. This could be due to education helping women navigate discriminatory environments more effectively or exposing them to structural discrimination without the necessary institutional support. The study suggests further exploration but emphasizes that education alone is not enough; sociocultural reforms must be accompanied.

5. Suggestions to Improve Rural Education (Q10)

The study found that rural women, including higher-educated ones, acknowledge the need for improved infrastructure, trained teachers, and career counseling. However, they also highlighted the lack of hostel facilities, sanitary conditions, and digital access as significant barriers to continuing education. This highlights a critical research gap and policy implication, emphasizing the need to bridge the rural-urban divide for equitable empowerment.

Conclusion of the Discussion

The study confirms that higher education in Kolar significantly empowers women economically, socially, and psychologically. Women with higher education experience greater agency, independence, and social mobility. However, rural women still face significant access and infrastructural challenges. The findings suggest the need for targeted educational reforms, including scholarships, mentorship, safety, and outreach programs, especially in rural areas. Education is not just a tool for employment but also a vehicle of empowerment, altering how women see themselves and society. This study offers actionable insights for policy-makers, educators, and gender equity advocates.

Recommendations

The recommendations for improving rural educational infrastructure include establishing more government-aided colleges, providing adequate facilities like clean toilets, electricity, libraries, and labs, and establishing safe transportation services for girls. Digital and vocational literacy programs should be introduced, integrating vocational skills training into the curriculum to increase employability. Scholarships and financial support should be expanded through campaigns in villages and local scholarship programs for rural girls pursuing higher education. Gender sensitization

and life skills education should be included, and families should be involved in workshops to change traditional attitudes towards female education. Monitoring of government schemes should be strengthened, and role models and mentoring should be encouraged. Safety and mobility should be improved, and hostel facilities should be provided for rural girls in urban campuses. Media and technology should be used to broadcast inspirational stories and educate about women's rights and opportunities. Community and religious leaders should be engaged to advocate for girls' education and reduce resistance from conservative groups. Long-term policy recommendations include framing district-level educational policies and allocating special development grants for female education enhancement.

Conclusion

The study highlights the importance of higher education in empowering women in Kolar district, highlighting the disparity in access and outcomes. Urban women in Kolar benefit from better infrastructure, societal support, and exposure, while rural women face barriers like poor infrastructure, limited mobility, early marriages, and conservative social norms. Despite government initiatives, the effectiveness of these schemes in rural Kolar remains limited. There is also a lack of consistent monitoring and evaluation of educational programs targeted at rural girls and women. The study confirms the hypotheses that higher education significantly enhances women's empowerment, with urban women having greater access and benefiting more. It also shows a positive correlation between education and awareness of gender discrimination. Empowering women through education, especially in rural areas, is a fundamental step towards achieving gender justice, economic progress, and social equality.

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