



Feminization of Higher Education: Participation and Challenges of Women Scholars

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Abstract

Over the last half-century, women's participation in higher education has moved from marginality to numerical dominance in many parts of the world. Globally, women now constitute a majority of higher education students; in 2020 there were approximately 113 women enrolled for every 100 men (UNESCO, 2022; IFC, 2025). This "feminization of higher education" has been celebrated as a key milestone in gender equality. Yet beneath the aggregate numbers lie persistent inequalities: horizontal segregation by field of study, vertical segregation within academic careers, wage gaps, precarious employment, and pervasive experiences of bias and harassment (Morley, 1999; Hendley, 2015; Zubarioglu, 2024). This paper offers a sociological analysis of feminization in higher education, focusing on women's participation as students and scholars and the structural challenges they continue to face. Drawing on global and India-specific data, it argues that feminization at the level of enrolments has not translated into gender equality in power, prestige, or working conditions in academia. Instead, higher education systems exhibit a paradox: women's growing numerical presence co-exists with entrenched gendered hierarchies. The paper concludes that addressing this paradox requires moving from narrow access-oriented policies towards transformative strategies that tackle segregation, institutional culture, and the undervaluation of women's academic labour.

Keywords: feminization of higher education; women scholars; gender equality; glass ceiling; India; academic careers.

1. Introduction

The term *feminization of higher education* is generally used to describe the situation in which women equal or outnumber men in higher education enrolments, sometimes extending to concerns about the "over-representation" of women among students (Morley, 2010; Hendley, 2015). From a historical perspective, this represents a dramatic reversal. For much of the 19th and early 20th centuries, universities were elite institutions designed primarily for the education of men. Expansion and democratization in the second half of the 20th century opened the doors more widely to women, with female enrolment rising rapidly across regions (Hendley, 2015; Morley, 2010).

Recent global data show that women's enrolment advantage is now entrenched in many systems. UNESCO's *Higher Education Global Data Report* indicates that by 2020 the global gender parity index (GPI) in tertiary education reached 1.13, meaning 113 women enrolled for every 100 men (UNESCO, 2022; IFC, 2025). A World Bank analysis similarly reports that female tertiary enrolment exceeds male enrolment by more than five percentage points in over 100 countries (Bonfert & Wadhwa, 2024).

However, celebratory narratives about feminization can obscure enduring structural inequalities. Research across regions documents that women remain concentrated in specific fields such as education and health, are under-represented in STEM and high-status disciplines, and face glass ceilings in academic careers, especially at senior ranks (OECD, 2020; Morley, 1999; UNESCO IESALC, 2023). Feminization, understood narrowly as numerical parity or majority in enrolments, does not automatically result in substantive gender equality. This paper therefore asks:

1. How has women's participation in higher education evolved, globally and in contexts such as India?
2. In what sense can we speak of "feminization" when women remain under-represented among senior scholars and leaders?
3. What key challenges shape the experiences and careers of women scholars in contemporary higher education?

2. Conceptualising the Feminization of Higher Education

The concept of feminization has at least three analytically distinct dimensions:

1. Quantitative feminization – women's numerical parity or dominance in student enrolments and degrees awarded.
2. Horizontal feminization – women's concentration in specific disciplines and feminised occupational tracks.
3. Vertical feminization – women's presence (or absence) across academic ranks and leadership positions.

Early discussion of feminization often focused tightly on enrolment data, framing women's rising participation as evidence of progress towards gender equality (Hendley, 2015). Feminist scholars, however, warn that such a focus risks reducing gender equality to simple head counts, ignoring the distribution of power, resources, and recognition (Morley, 1999; Morley, 2010).

Morley (1999), writing on Commonwealth higher education, argues that universities simultaneously expand opportunities for women and reproduce unequal gender relations in everyday institutional life—through hiring practices, informal networks, and the organisation of research and teaching. More recent work on gender mainstreaming in higher education shows that even where policies exist, gaps between policy rhetoric and practice are common, and sexist practices such as harassment can undermine reform agendas (Morley, 2010; Yousaf & Schmiede, 2016).

In this paper, feminization is therefore treated as a multi-layered process: expanding female participation in higher education is significant, but it co-exists with persistent inequalities in what women study, what positions they occupy, and how their work is valued.

3. Global Trends in Women's Participation in Higher Education

3.1 Enrolment and Attainment

OECD data show that in most member and partner countries, women have overtaken men in tertiary attainment: in 2018, 40% of women aged 25–64 held a tertiary degree compared to 34% of men; among younger adults (25–34), women's advantage was even larger (OECD, 2020). Women also make up the majority of new entrants at bachelor's and master's level across OECD countries (OECD, 2020).

UNESCO's global data corroborate this picture. The 2022 *Higher Education Global Data Report* notes that, at the global level, women's participation in tertiary education now exceeds men's, with a parity index of 1.13 in 2020 (UNESCO, 2022). A recent World Bank "gender data story" emphasises that female tertiary enrolment rates exceed male rates by more than five percentage points in over 100 countries, even as girls in low-income countries still face barriers at primary and secondary levels (Bonfert & Wadhwa, 2024).

3.2 Persistent Segregation by Field

Despite gains in access, horizontal segregation remains strong. Women predominate in disciplines such as education, humanities and arts, and health and welfare, while men remain over-represented in engineering, manufacturing, construction, and many STEM fields (OECD, 2020; World Bank, 2024). UNESCO and World Bank analyses show that women represent far less than half of graduates in STEM-related tertiary programmes in most countries, and are more likely than men to switch out of STEM fields or drop out (World Bank, 2024).

This segregation has significant implications for labour-market outcomes, as STEM and some professional fields often offer higher returns. Feminization of higher education can therefore coincide with continued male dominance in high-paying, high-prestige sectors.

3.3 Vertical Segregation in Academic Careers

At the level of academic staff, patterns are more mixed. UNESCO-IESALC's work on Latin America, for example, finds that women constitute between 35% and 50% of academics in participating countries, but are under-represented among senior ranks and research leaders (UNESCO IESALC, 2023). Similar patterns appear across regions: women are over-represented in lower-paid, teaching-intensive or temporary posts and under-represented in full professorships, research chairs, and top leadership (Morley, 1999; People Insight, 2023).

Zubarioglu (2024) describes this as a persistent "glass ceiling" in academia: despite rising numbers of women academics, patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, and institutional cultures continue to constrain women's access to senior positions and influence.

4. Feminization of Higher Education in India and the Global South

India offers an important case for examining feminization in a large, stratified system in the Global South.

4.1 Enrolment Patterns and Gender Parity

The All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021–22 reports that total higher education enrolment reached about 4.33 crore students, with female enrolment rising to 2.07 crore—a 32% increase since 2014–15 (Ministry of Education, 2024). Women now constitute roughly 48% of total enrolment, and the gender parity index (GPI) in higher education stands at 1.01, indicating that female gross enrolment has slightly surpassed male enrolment for several consecutive years (Ministry of Education, 2024; Sarma, 2024).

Time-series analysis of GER from 2011–12 to 2020–21 shows that while male GER was higher in earlier years, female GER has been higher since 2018–19 (Sarma, 2024). Kumar et al. (2025) likewise find that women's enrolment has grown faster than men's, with women outnumbering men in several postgraduate programmes and steadily entering previously male-dominated areas such as certain STEM disciplines.

However, this aggregate picture masks social and regional inequalities. Gender gaps remain larger in some social groups and in certain types of institutions, with government universities sometimes displaying greater gender gaps than private institutions, and marginalised communities continuing to lag in female participation (Kumar et al., 2025).

4.2 Fields of Study and Elite Institutions

In India, as elsewhere, feminization is uneven across disciplines. AISHE data show that women are highly represented in arts, education, and health-related fields but remain under-represented in engineering and technology, where gender gaps persist despite policy efforts (Ministry of Education, 2024; Kumar et al., 2025). News reports on premier institutes such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) indicate that female undergraduate admissions hover around 20%, despite the creation of supernumerary seats and diversity policies (Times of India, 2025).

Similar patterns are observed in other parts of the Global South. In China, for example, women have come to outnumber men in general colleges and universities since around 2009, yet they remain under-represented in postgraduate education and in high-status scientific fields (Tian, 2024). Such evidence underscores that feminization is often strongest in mass-access segments of higher education and in feminised disciplines, while elite institutions and STEM programmes remain more male dominated.

4.3 Policy Context

Policies such as India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 explicitly aim to raise the GER to 50% by 2035 and emphasise gender balance in admissions (Sarma, 2024; Kumar et al., 2025). Scholarship schemes, hostel and safety provisions, and targeted outreach have contributed to rising female participation, particularly among disadvantaged groups. Yet studies suggest that early marriage, familial expectations, and local gender norms continue to constrain women's progression from secondary to tertiary education in many regions (Young Lives & CESS, 2025).

5. Women Scholars: Participation and Persistent Challenges

Numerical feminization among students has not eliminated gender inequalities in academic careers. This section focuses on the experiences and challenges of women scholars.

5.1 Vertical Segregation and the Glass Ceiling

Research from multiple contexts emphasises vertical segregation: women are concentrated in junior or teaching-intensive roles and under-represented in senior academic and leadership positions (Morley, 1999; People Insight, 2023; UNESCO IESALC, 2023). In the UK, for instance, women make up a majority of students and a substantial share of junior staff, yet only around 28% of academic leaders are women and gender pay gaps persist across universities (People Insight, 2023).

Studies of the “glass ceiling” in academia show that promotion processes, informal networks, and leadership cultures remain male-dominated, often privileging linear, uninterrupted career trajectories that are less compatible with women’s disproportionate care responsibilities (Morley, 1999; Zubarioglu, 2024). Yousaf and Schmiede’s (2016) work in Pakistan further links sexual harassment and exploitation to women’s underrepresentation at positions of academic excellence and power, arguing that harassment functions as a form of glass ceiling across hierarchy levels.

5.2 Harassment, Bias, and Hostile Environments

Gender-based bias and harassment are widely documented in academic settings. Zubarioglu (2024) notes that patriarchal norms and sexist practices—ranging from everyday microaggressions to overt harassment—make it difficult for women to feel safe and fully participate in academic life. Al-Fanar Media’s 2025 report similarly highlights how women academics across regions experience discrimination, harassment, and appropriation of ideas, often with limited institutional support and fear of retaliation for reporting incidents (Al-Fanar Media, 2025).

Yousaf and Schmiede (2016) show that women at multiple academic ranks attribute their underrepresentation in senior positions partly to harassment, which they see as a pervasive but under-reported barrier to advancement. Such findings align with broader literature on gender mainstreaming, which warns that formal equality policies can be undermined by informal cultures that tolerate sexist behaviours and minimize women’s complaints (Morley, 2010).

5.3 Care Responsibilities, Work–Life Balance, and Precarity

Women scholars often bear disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work, including childcare, elder care, and domestic labour. The COVID-19 pandemic and expansion of work-from-home arrangements highlighted how these responsibilities shape academic productivity, with many women reporting increased teaching and care loads and reduced time for research (e.g., Deshpande, 2021; OECD, 2021). This interacts with academic norms that value uninterrupted, high-intensity research trajectories, thereby penalising those with caregiving responsibilities.

At the same time, the **casualisation** of academic labour has had gendered effects. Women are over-represented in temporary, part-time, and teaching-only contracts, which offer limited security, benefits, or promotion prospects (Morley, 1999; Morley, 2010). These positions are often framed as flexible, but in practice they can trap women in precarious roles while men are more likely to secure tenure-track or permanent posts.

5.4 Invisible Labour: Mentoring, Service, and Diversity Work

Another challenge is the unequal distribution of invisible labour within universities. Women scholars frequently take on disproportionate share of mentoring, student pastoral care, committee work, and diversity-related responsibilities—tasks that are essential to institutional functioning but often under-valued in promotion criteria (Morley, 1999; Zubarioglu, 2024). This “academic housework” can limit time available for research outputs that are more heavily rewarded in evaluation systems.

6. Intersectional Dimensions of Participation and Challenge

Feminization is not experienced uniformly by all women. Intersectional analyses highlight how class, race, caste, rural–urban location, disability, and other axes of inequality shape access to higher education and academic careers.

Kumar et al. (2025) show that while female enrolment has increased in India overall, gender gaps remain wider in certain social groups and are particularly pronounced in government universities, where poorer and rural students are more concentrated. Sarma (2024) similarly finds that female GER gains are uneven across regions and disciplines, with women from lower socio-economic backgrounds facing compounded barriers.

Global evidence indicates that poor, rural, and minority women are far less likely to complete secondary education and progress to higher education than their more privileged peers (Bonfert & Wadhwa, 2024). Even within the academy, women from marginalised communities may face layered discrimination, including racism, casteism, and xenophobia, alongside sexism (Morley, 2010; Tian, 2024).

These intersectional patterns complicate the idea of feminization: while aggregate statistics suggest that women are “doing better” than men in higher education, many women remain excluded or marginalised, and some groups of men (for example, from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds) also experience educational disadvantage.

7. Policy and Institutional Responses

7.1 From Access to Equality: Rethinking Feminization

Scholars argue that policy debates must move beyond a narrow focus on enrolment numbers towards substantive equality in higher education (Morley, 1999; Khare, 2023). Khare (2023), writing on “gendered concerns of improved female participation”, warns that increased access can coexist with hidden disadvantages—such as tracking into lower-return courses, persistent safety concerns, and limited opportunities for leadership.

UNESCO and the World Bank similarly call for integrated strategies that address persistent gender gaps in STEM, leadership, and employment outcomes, rather than assuming that feminization at the student level will automatically translate into gender equality in work and public life (UNESCO, 2022; IFC, 2025).

7.2 Gender Mainstreaming and Institutional Reform

Gender mainstreaming has become a common framework for addressing gender inequality within higher education, involving gender-sensitive budgeting, data systems, policies, and accountability mechanisms (Morley, 2010; UNESCO, 2023). Effective mainstreaming requires:

- Systematic gender-disaggregated data on students and staff across ranks, contracts, and disciplines.
- Transparent recruitment, promotion, and pay structures, including regular gender pay audits.
- Robust anti-harassment policies, complaint mechanisms, and survivor-centred support.
- Mentoring and leadership programmes targeting women scholars, especially from under-represented groups.

Morley (2010) cautions, however, that mainstreaming efforts can become technocratic or tokenistic if they are not accompanied by broader shifts in institutional culture and power relations.

7.3 National and Regional Initiatives

At national and subnational levels, policies aimed at expanding women's higher education participation often combine financial support, reservation or quota measures, and targeted schemes. In India, state initiatives such as fee waivers and scholarship programmes have been credited with boosting women's enrolment in some regions (Kumar et al., 2025; Ministry of Education, 2024). Recent state-level schemes providing financial aid to girls to prevent school dropouts and support transitions to higher education exemplify this approach (Jharkhand government, 2024).

In academic careers, some systems have experimented with gender quotas in leadership bodies, targets for female professorships, and dedicated funding for women-led research. While such measures can accelerate change, they also face resistance and must be coupled with deeper transformations in evaluation criteria, work cultures, and conceptions of merit.

8. Conclusion

The feminization of higher education is one of the most striking educational shifts of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Globally, women now constitute a majority of tertiary students and, in many countries, of degree recipients (UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2020; Bonfert & Wadhwa, 2024). In countries like India, female enrolment has risen sharply over the past decade, and gender parity—or even a slight female advantage—has been achieved in aggregate enrolment indicators (Ministry of Education, 2024; Sarma, 2024; Kumar et al., 2025).

Yet feminization in this narrow sense has not dismantled the gendered architecture of higher education. Women remain clustered in feminised disciplines; they continue to be under-represented in STEM, senior academic ranks, and leadership positions; they confront enduring pay gaps, harassment, and unequal care

burdens; and many women—particularly from marginalised communities—remain under-served or excluded altogether (Morley, 1999; Yousaf & Schmiede, 2016; Zubarioglu, 2024; Al-Fanar Media, 2025).

From a sociological perspective, the feminization of higher education is best understood as a contradictory transformation. It testifies to the success of struggles for women's access to education and the expansion of mass higher education systems. At the same time, it reveals how deeply gendered norms and power relations remain embedded in educational institutions and labour markets.

For policy and practice, the key implication is that counting women is not enough. Moving from feminization to genuine gender equality requires:

- tackling horizontal and vertical segregation;
- challenging hostile and exclusionary institutional cultures;
- recognising and redistributing care and academic housework; and
- ensuring that rising participation translates into equitable opportunities for academic leadership, research impact, and secure employment.

Only then can higher education fulfil its promise as a transformative space not just for women's access, but for gender justice more broadly.

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