Gender equality in psychology: An intersectional feminist perspective from India

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Some disclaimers

- Lack of national database on gender composition in psychology

- Presentation based on available limited data, and observations on the field as an ‘insider’
Structure of this presentation

- Brief overview of growth of psychology in India
- Some data on gender composition: student enrolment, faculty positions
- Key arguments/observations
  - Feminization of the discipline
  - Persistence of socio-cultural barriers to women’s employment
- Way forward: More research and interventions needed
“Relatively little is known regarding women’s current status in psychology in countries beyond the US and Canada” (Florence Denmark, 1998)
Emergence of modern scientific psychology in India

- As part of colonial system of education
- Establishment of first department in Calcutta University in 1915
- Adoption of positivistic model of science
- Parallelly, interest in psychoanalysis
- No mention of women in historical accounts of early period
- First woman to receive PhD from Calcutta Univ in 1957 (Sanyal, 2021)

“Dichotomy of natural sciences-inspired male scientists/teachers and students/followers who were largely women” (Kumar, 2011) in the early years
Post-independence (1947) context

- Education seen as ‘idiom of progress and modernity’
- Exponential growth in higher education [1950-2020]

From 606 colleges and universities to 51,649

From 0.18 million students to 37.4 million
  - 49% are women

From 24,000 to 1.5 million faculty
  - 42.5% women faculty

[ AISHE Report, Govt of India, 2020 ]

- Women’s education seen as indicator of human/social development, and part of national policies & programmes
Some paradoxes

- India ranked 140 out of 156 countries for gender equality in Global Gender Gap Report (WEF, 2021)
- Low work force participation of women (27%)
- Women’s education has U-shaped relationship with WFP (Chatterjee et al, 2018)
- Underrepresentation of women amongst higher education faculty, particularly at senior levels (Morley & Crossouard, 2015)
- Steady increase in proportion of women enrolled in higher education despite overall gender gap (AISHE, 2020)
- In STEM fields, female proportion 42% while it is 33% in USA (World Bank, 2021, cited in ET, 2022)
- Fifth largest research producer (Scopus, 2017)
Gender Distribution in MA, MPhil and PhD programmes (2010-2020)

MA (%)

PG Male  |  PG Female
---|---
2010-11 | 20%
2011-12 | 29%
2012-13 | 31%
2013-14 | 26%
2014-15 | 20%
2015-16 | 21%
2016-17 | 20%
2017-18 | 20%
2018-19 | 20%
2019-20 | 20%

MPhil (%)

MPhil Male  |  MPhil Female
---|---
2010-11 | 72%
2011-12 | 70%
2012-13 | 67%
2013-14 | 71%
2014-15 | 70%
2015-16 | 69%
2016-17 | 70%
2017-18 | 74%
2018-19 | 79%
2019-20 | 80%

PhD (%)

PhD Male  |  PhD Female
---|---
2010-11 | 28%
2011-12 | 30%
2012-13 | 33%
2013-14 | 31%
2014-15 | 31%
2015-16 | 26%
2016-17 | 21%
2017-18 | 20%
2018-19 | 20%
2019-20 | 20%

Source: All India Survey on Higher Education Report, Govt of India, 2020)
Gender/social disadvantage of Psychology students in a public University (2009–2019)

Growing minority of men but increasing representation of women from socially disadvantaged groups a welcome feature

Source: TISS, Mumbai, 2022
Gender imbalance in faculty positions but large pool at entry level

Faculty Positions in Psychology Departments in Public Universities (2022)

Source: Websites of Universities, 2022
Indian Association of Clinical Psychologists (IACP) Fellows and Presidents (1968-2022)

IACP Fellows

- Female: 78%
- Male: 22%

IACP Presidents

- Female: 15%
- Male: 85%
Practicing counsellors in six metro cities
(2022)

Source: Practo
May, 2022
Two overarching explanations/observations

- Feminization of the discipline
- Growing minority of men but where are the ‘missing’ women?
  - Persistence of socio-cultural barriers to women’s employment
‘Feminization’ of the discipline

- Phenomenon of increasing trend of movement of women to certain areas of study and occupations (*Richter & Griesel, 1999*)
- Concerns about influxes of women precipitating decline in status and prestige of field
- Our data shows predominant representation of women students, in entry level positions in Universities, and in (largely private) mental health sector
  - With decline in men entrants, initial perception of discipline as ‘science’ giving way to a ‘gender-stereotyped major’
Implications of changing demographics

- If the same trend continues, what will the profile of the field be in the coming years?

- Relation between status of field and overrepresentation of women maybe accounted for by gendered socialization?
Twin factors in feminization

▪ ‘Emotional labour’
  ➤ Current perception of discipline as primarily related to health and education professions – “as women's work” and hence may not appeal much to male students

▪ Dearth of worthwhile employment opportunities in the field
  ➤ Academia: Post-economic liberalization of 1990s, rise of private sector and decline of public funded Universities
  ➤ Mental health sector characterized by relatively low wages, is unregulated and hence uncertainties of profession may dent primacy of provider role for men

Professional counsellors in multiple settings of hospitals, schools & educational institutions, family courts, NGOs, helplines, and in private practice (Sriram, 2016)
Persistence of socio-cultural gendered barriers in employment

- Socio-cultural barriers to girls’ entry, retention in education identified [e.g., Majumdar & Mooij, 2011]

- But gender composition in psychology favours women as students, as faculty at entry level

- Studies on women’s career choices show upwardly mobile caste groups support girls’ education for improving family’s social status, marriage prospects but not freedom in decision-making (e.g., Anandhi, 2022)

- Disconnect between gender parity in education and tolerance towards women’s autonomy

- Barriers in employment persist
  - Marriage, motherhood, caregiving key barrier accounting for low WFP (e.g., Arabandi, 2019)
  - Sexist attitudes in faculty recruitment viewing women as less flexible & hence less effective (e.g., Chaudhuri, 2018)
  - ‘Income effect’ and withdrawal from job market with upward mobility (e.g., Chatterjee et al, 2018)
Capacity-building initiative for women in higher education (2003–2013)

- Introduced by University Grants Commission as response to ‘invisibility’ of women in higher education management
- 5-day workshops to encourage, mentor women faculty for academic/institutional leadership positions
- Participatory methodology: self-reflection, critical awareness about gendered barriers to education, sharing of experiences, and networking
- ToT model, developing a community of practice through collective learning
- No impact evaluation done but positive feedback (Desai, 2013)
Some thoughts on ways forward

- Interventions for promoting leadership capabilities among women from underrepresented social groups in particular
- Role of rising female education in Psychology needs further investigation
  - Identifying factors – individual, institutional, societal -- that contribute to decision-making processes related to career choices
  - Unexplored area - migration for further education in Psychology
- But mere inclusion of ‘women’ is not enough; critical awareness of gendered inequalities essential for gender equality
- Gender equality is not simply a “women’s issue”!
Thank you for your time and attention