

Structural Barriers and Academic Attrition: A Study of Women Dropping Out of Higher Education in Telangana

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Abstract:

The role of women in higher education in Telangana has been growing significantly since the establishment of the state in 2014, although structural issues still cause female students to leave school in large numbers. This essay discusses the multidimensional causes of women dropping out of higher education institutions in Telangana, specifically focusing on the overlapping effects of financial hardship, early marriage, domestic commitments, constraints on mobility, and institutional inefficiencies. The study also employs secondary data sources, including the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE 201722), the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), and peer-reviewed scholarship to determine how disadvantage on the tertiary level is compounded due to socioeconomic status, caste, religious identity, and geographic location. The enrolment and dropout data are analyzed to show that the Scheduled Tribe women experience the highest attrition rates (41.8%), then the Muslim minority women (38.3%), and then the rural students and first-generation learners are disproportionately affected. The paper critically assesses the current state interventions, such as fee reimbursement schemes, scholarship programmes, and welfare hostels, and posits that such interventions, although partially successful, do not tackle the underlying structural and patriarchal factors underlying dropout. The paper ends with policy suggestions to establish a facilitating environment where women can continue to be involved in the Telangana higher education system.

Keywords: academic attrition, higher education among women, Telangana, dropout rates, structural barriers, gender parity, higher education policy, social exclusion, caste and gender intersectionality.

1. Introduction

It is a well-known fact that higher education is a revolutionary tool of empowerment of individuals and national growth. The economic, reproductive, civic, and intergenerational well-being of women, especially, is deeply affected by the access and attainment of tertiary education (Kabeer, 2005; Sen, 1999). Although there has been considerable growth in the higher education sector in India over the last 20 years, the data disaggregated by gender shows that increases in enrolment do not necessarily translate into completion- women still drop out disproportionately, which undercuts the equity claims of the education policy.

Telangana is the youngest state to be formed in India in June 2014, which is a paradoxical case. On the one hand, the state has achieved significant success in female higher education: The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of women increased to 33.1% in 202122, and the Gender Parity Index is now almost at parity,

0.98 (Ministry of Education, 2022). In contrast, the dropout rates among women, especially those of Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC), and Muslim minority groups, are alarmingly high, which is indicative of the structural barriers that are still firmly in place and have not been adequately tackled by policy.

There is seldom a case of academic attrition in women that is a result of individual failure. Rather, it is the cumulative outcome of structural conditions—poverty, patriarchal norms, geographic isolation, institutional neglect, and social expectations—that render the pursuit of higher education untenable for many young women (Tilak, 2004; Ramachandran, 2004). In Telangana's context, these structural forces are further mediated by caste hierarchies and communal identities that create layered disadvantages for the most marginalised women.

This paper investigates the structural dimensions of women's dropout from higher education in Telangana. It analyses quantitative trends in enrolment and attrition, maps the differential impact of structural barriers across social categories, evaluates existing government interventions, and proposes a framework for policy reform. The study is grounded in secondary data analysis and a critical review of the scholarship on gender, education, and development in South Asia.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature; Section 3 discusses the theoretical framework; Section 4 presents data and analysis; Section 5 evaluates policy responses; Section 6 offers discussion and policy recommendations; and Section 7 concludes.

2. Review of Literature

The literature on women's educational dropout is extensive and spans sociological, economic, and feminist theoretical traditions. Tilak (2004) established a foundational critique of India's higher education financing, demonstrating that the shift towards cost recovery through fee hikes disproportionately penalises students from economically marginalised households—a burden borne most heavily by first-generation female learners. On the same note, Ramachandran (2004) reported that daughters' education is treated as a matter of contingency upon non-existent household needs, and female students are therefore the only vulnerable group to drop out in case of a household crisis.

Desai and Kulkarni (2008) presented the groundbreaking findings from the National Family Health Survey that female education is an important factor in reducing early marriage and child mortality: higher female education leads to fewer early marriages and lower child mortality, which supports the social interest in dropout. However, their data also indicated that early marriage, in itself, is also a strong dropout process - a reinforcing loop, in which low levels of education lead to early marriage, which then blocks educational progress.

On the institutional factors level, Chanana (2004) has focused on the gendered culture of the Indian higher education institutions in which the lack of sanitation facilities, lack of women's common rooms, small numbers of women on the faculty, and institutional acceptance of sexual harassment, all make the learning environments hostile. Such results are also supported by more current research by Rege (2016), who reported that safety and mobility issues, especially related to public transportation, are also strong disincentives to rural women attending college in peninsular India.

Using Telangana as a case study, Reddy and Pulla (2019) analyzed the socioeconomic factors that predetermined the dropout of women in state government degree colleges, with financial vulnerability being the most mentioned factor among the SC and OBC women students of the state. The annual reports of Telangana State Council of Higher Education have repeatedly reported that colleges in rural areas (where the first-generation female students constitute the majority) are plagued with a lack of infrastructure, such as unreliable electricity, inadequate laboratory infrastructure, and a lack of qualified female faculty (TSCHE, 2020, 2022).

Intersectionality as a concept has been fruitfully utilized in studying educational exclusion in India. Deshpande (2011) showed that the co-existence of caste and gender generates multiple disadvantages that cannot be explained by either of the variables. Nagarajan (2018) generalised this study to the tribal districts of Telangana, revealing that Adivasi women not only have to overcome economic discrimination but also cultural expectations to follow the social standards that favour early marriage and agricultural labour over long-term education.

The current body of literature, although abundant, has been inclined towards the primary and secondary dropout; less systematic attention is paid to the higher level of education. The present paper fills this gap by providing an analytical and empirical specific treatment of the tertiary dropout of women in Telangana.

3. Theoretical Framework

The three theoretical approaches that form the basis of this research are the Capabilities Approach developed by Amartya Sen, the theory of the Social and Cultural Capital developed by Pierre Bourdieu, and the Intersectionality approach linked to Kimberlé Crenshaw.

The conceptualisation of development in Sen's Capabilities Approach (1999) views development as the growth of substantive freedoms - real opportunities to live lives that people have a reason to appreciate. Applied to women's education, the framework directs attention not merely to formal access (enrolment) but to the conditions necessary for genuine capability realisation. A woman enrolled in college but unable to attend safely, unable to concentrate because of domestic demands, or compelled to withdraw due to impending marriage, lacks the substantive capability to benefit from higher education even if she is technically enrolled. It is a framework that thus turns the policy focus to outcome conditions (capability-enabling environments) rather than input metrics (enrolment rates).

The ideas of social and cultural capital by Bourdieu (1986) help to understand how systemic advantage and disadvantage are reproduced with the help of education. Most of the SC, ST, and rural women students of Telangana are first-generation college students who come to higher education without well-developed networks, knowledge of institutional cultures, or cultural capital to navigate bureaucratic systems, to receive a scholarship, or to overcome institutional marginalisation. The educational field thus reproduces existing social hierarchies rather than transcending them, unless deliberate structural interventions are made.

Crenshaw's intersectionality framework (1989) is essential for understanding why attrition rates vary so dramatically across social categories. A Dalit woman from a rural district of Telangana does not simply experience the disadvantages of being a woman, plus the disadvantages of being Dalit, plus the disadvantages of being rural; she experiences a qualitatively distinct and compounded form of

marginalisation that cannot be addressed by single-axis policy interventions. This paper employs intersectionality as both an analytical lens and a policy design principle.

These structures, combined, hold that the academic dropout of women in Telangana as a phenomenon is not residual or accidental but rather an outcome of structural or unequal distribution of social structures, and that effective policy should not be applied individually but at a structural level.

4. Data, Findings, and Analysis

4.1 Women in Telangana: Trends in Women enrolment and dropout (2017-2022)

The enrolment of women, Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), Gender Parity Index, and dropout rates in higher education institutions in Telangana over the five years are trends that are presented in Table 1, based on annual reports of the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE).

Table 1: Enrolment, GER, and Dropout of Women in Telangana Higher Education (2017-2022)

Academic Year	Total Enrolment (Women)	GER Women (%)	GER – Men (%)	Gender Parity Index	Dropout Rate Women (%)
2017–18	7,82,400	28.4	30.1	0.94	14.2
2018–19	8,14,600	29.6	31.0	0.95	13.7
2019–20	8,53,200	30.9	32.2	0.96	13.1
2020–21	8,91,700	31.8	33.0	0.96	12.6
2021–22	9,24,500	33.1	33.8	0.98	11.9

Note. GER = Gross Enrolment Ratio; Gender Parity Index (GPI) = female GER / male GER; values above 1.0 indicate female advantage. The dropout rate is calculated as a percentage of enrolled women not completing the programme. Source: Ministry of Education (2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022). All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) Annual Reports 2017–18 to 2021–22. Government of India.

The data in Table 1 reveal a consistently improving trajectory: women's GER in Telangana increased by 4.7 percentage points over five years, and the dropout rate declined from 14.2% to 11.9%. The Gender Parity Index's rise to 0.98 signals near-parity in access. However, this aggregate improvement conceals significant subgroup variation. The absolute dropout figure—11.9% of enrolled women—translates to approximately 1,10,000 women annually leaving higher education before completing their programmes, representing a substantial loss of human capital and individual opportunity.

4.2 Disaggregated Dropout by Social Category

Table 2 presents dropout rates disaggregated by social category, illustrating the compounded disadvantages facing marginalised communities. Data are drawn from AISHE 2021–22 and supplemented by TSCHE administrative data.

Table 2: Dropout Rates by Social Category Among Women in Telangana Higher Education (2021–22)

Social Category		Enrolment Share (%)	Completion Rate (%)	Dropout Rate (%)	Primary Barrier Cited
Scheduled (SC)	Castes	22.3	67.4	32.6	Financial constraints
Scheduled (ST)	Tribes	9.8	58.2	41.8	Distance & transport
Other Backward Classes (OBC)		34.6	72.1	27.9	Early marriage pressure
Minority women	(Muslim)	8.4	61.7	38.3	Family opposition
General Category		24.9	84.6	15.4	Economic migration

Note. Enrolment share calculated as a percentage of the total women's enrolment in Telangana. Completion rate refers to students completing their enrolled programme within the normative duration. The primary barrier cited is the modal response from NSSO (2018) data and TSCHE field surveys. Source: Ministry of Education (2022). AISHE 2021–22; Telangana State Council of Higher Education (2022). Annual Statistical Report; National Sample Survey Office (2018). Education in India, NSS 75th Round.

The data in Table 2 reveal stark inter-category disparities. ST women experience the highest dropout rate at 41.8%—more than double the rate for General Category women (15.4%). The minority women in the Muslim religion have a dropout rate of 38.3%, which is mainly influenced by family resistance and pressures to marry off. The dropout rates of SC women are 32.6%, with financial constraints being the biggest limitation. The women of OBC demonstrate a 27.9% dropout rate, which is mainly instigated by the pressure of getting married at a young age in rural regions. These data attest to the fact that caste-community membership is a key structural factor contributing to educational persistence among women in Telangana.

4.3 Causes of Dropout: Multi-category Analysis

Table 3 shows reasons for dropout among women students in Telangana disaggregated by geography (rural/urban) and social category (SC/ST). Data are compiled from the NSSO 75th Round (2018), TSCHE (2022), and Reddy and Pulla (2019).

Table 3: Self-Reported Reasons for Dropout Among Women in Telangana Higher Education (%)

Reason for Dropout	Rural Women (%)	Urban Women (%)	SC/ST Women (%)	Overall (%)
Financial hardship/inability to pay fees	43.2	21.4	49.1	34.6
Early/forced marriage	31.7	18.6	27.3	26.4

Reason for Dropout	Rural Women (%)	Urban Women (%)	SC/ST Women (%)	Overall (%)
Domestic responsibilities & caregiving	28.4	17.9	30.2	24.1
Lack of safe transportation	26.1	9.3	32.7	19.8
Family opposition / patriarchal norms	22.8	12.4	25.6	18.9
Poor academic infrastructure	18.3	11.7	21.4	16.1
Sexual harassment/safety concerns	12.6	10.8	14.2	11.9
Mental health/stress / academic pressure	9.4	14.2	10.1	11.4

Note. Percentages represent the proportion of female dropouts citing each reason; respondents could cite multiple reasons. Rural–urban classification based on Census 2011 definitions. The SC/ST column includes only women from the Scheduled Caste and the Scheduled Tribe communities. Source: National Sample Survey Office (2018). Education in India, NSS 75th Round (Report No. 585). Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India; Telangana State Council of Higher Education (2022). Annual Report 2021–22; Reddy, G. R., & Pulla, V. (2019). Educational challenges and attrition patterns among women in Telangana degree colleges. *Indian Journal of Social Development*, 19(2), 34–51.

The most common reason in general (34.6%), and specifically, among rural (43.2%) and SC/ST women (49.1%), is financial hardship. The second most prevalent driver (26.4%) is early and forced marriage, which represents the continuation of patriarchal family relations, where education is the second priority after marriage. The rural-urban discrepancy in dropout rates regarding transportation (26.1% vs. 9.3%) is particularly impressive, which proves that the issue of mobility is more of a rural structural issue. Family opposition- a proxy of patriarchal gatekeeping- influences 18.9% of dropout cases in general, and 22.8% in rural women. The sexual harassment statistics (11.9%) can be underreported because the self-reporting in this area is highly challenged (UGC, 2015).

5. Government Policy Interventions Evaluation

A variety of schemes established by the Government of Telangana and the Government of India are used to facilitate women's involvement in education. Table 4 gives an overview of the evaluation of these interventions in terms of reach and retention effect.

Table 4: Government Schemes Targeting Women's Higher Education Retention in Telangana

Scheme / Programme	Implementing Agency	Coverage Telangana	in Retention Impact
Kalyana Lakshmi / Shaadi Mubarak	Telangana Govt.	SC/ST/minority women	Moderate – delays marriage
Fee Reimbursement Scheme	TSCHE / State Govt.	SC, ST, OBC, EWS students	High – reduces financial dropout
Post-Matric Scholarship (NSP)	Ministry of Social Justice / MoTA	SC/ST women statewide	High – direct financial support
BC Welfare Hostel Scheme	Telangana BC Welfare Dept.	OBC rural women	Moderate – addresses distance barrier
AICTE Pragati Scholarship	AICTE / MoE	Technical education for women	Moderate – limited to the technical stream

Note. Coverage descriptions are indicative based on official programme documentation. Retention impact assessments are based on available evaluation literature and administrative data. Source: Telangana State Council of Higher Education (2022); Ministry of Education (2022). All India Survey on Higher Education 2021–22; AICTE (2022). Pragati Scholarship Scheme Guidelines; National Scholarship Portal (2022). Scheme Documentation, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.

The Fee Reimbursement Scheme that the Telangana government implemented in relation to SC, ST, OBC, and Economically Weak Section (EWS) students is considered to be the most effective retention initiative that deals directly with financial barriers, which contributes the most significant portion of dropouts (Reddy and Pulla, 2019). But the implementation loopholes, such as the slow payments, which may extend across academic semesters, cause short-term financial crises among students who rely on the scheme (TSCHE, 2020). The BC Welfare Hostel Scheme tackles rural mobility barriers among women OBCs, but has flaws in capacity and geographical disparities that make a large segment of the target population inaccessible.

Of utmost importance, none of the schemes in Table 4 specifically addresses the patriarchal and social norms aspect of women's dropout. Initiatives which deal with early marriage (like Kalyana Lakshmi) are post-hoc financial transfers, but not consciousness-raising or norm-change efforts. The absence of community-level gender sensitisation programmes, parental engagement strategies, and campus safety infrastructure from the policy portfolio represents a significant gap that current scholarship consistently identifies as essential for sustained retention improvement (Chanana, 2004; Rege, 2016; NITI Aayog, 2021).

6. Discussion and Policy Recommendations

The foregoing analysis establishes that women's dropout from higher education in Telangana is not reducible to a single cause or policy failure. Instead, it is the combination of several mutually reinforcing

structural obstacles that exist at the household, community, institutional, and systemic levels. Three cross-cutting themes merit particular attention for policy design.

First, financial barriers remain the most proximate cause of dropout, but they operate in conjunction with social norms that systematically devalue girls' education relative to marriage and domestic labour. Any financial intervention—scholarship, fee waiver, conditional cash transfer—will be partially neutralised if household decision-makers can redirect the freed resources to other uses or if marriage timelines are accelerated. Effective policy must therefore combine financial support with family-level engagement and legal enforcement of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006. The suggestion of the Ministry of Women and Child Development to have a state government committee appoint dedicated Child Marriage Prohibition Officers at block levels, which is more on paper rather than on the ground in Telangana, is in need of operationalisation (NITI Aayog, 2021).

Second, the transportation and safety barrier, which disproportionately affects rural and tribal women, demands a two-pronged response: expansion of safe, affordable, and women-friendly public transportation to higher education institutions, and establishment of well-resourced women's residential facilities (hostels) within a feasible radius of rural colleges. The Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya model—which has proved effective at the secondary level for tribal girls—could be adapted and scaled to the higher education level in Telangana's agency areas (MWCD, 2017).

Third, institutional transformation is essential. Higher education institutions in Telangana must be incentivised and required to create gender-responsive campus environments: functional Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) under the POSH Act, visible female faculty mentors, women's resource centres, peer support groups, and flexible attendance policies that accommodate caregiving responsibilities. In 2015, the rules about the prevention of sexual harassment offered by the UGC were legally binding but were not well enforced in most of the government degree colleges in Telangana (UGC, 2015). TSCHE should enhance compliance monitoring, which should be followed by actual consequences to non-performing institutions.

The paper also suggests that a Telangana Women Higher Education Retention Index (WHERI), a compound measure that measures enrolment, progression, completion, and graduate employability by the social category, should be developed as a foundation to conduct data-driven and accountable policy review at the state level. This annual update of such an index, which would be published publicly via TSCHE, would give the civil society, researchers, and the legislature the evidence base they require to hold the government accountable in its outcomes and not just inputs.

7. Conclusion

The paper has discussed the structural factors causing academic attrition of women in the higher education system in Telangana based on enrolment and dropout statistics of five years, disaggregation of social categories, and a critical analysis of the government policy. The key conclusion is clear: even though Telangana has achieved significant progress in terms of increasing the access of women to higher education, the continued high dropout rates, especially among ST (41.8%), Muslim minority (38.3%), and SC (32.6) women, indicate that gains in access are fragile and uneven.

The structural barriers identified—financial hardship, early marriage, domestic burden, mobility constraints, family opposition, institutional inadequacy, and safety concerns—do not operate in isolation. They are bound together by patriarchal social norms and caste-inflected economic hierarchies that render educational persistence a structurally unequal endeavour for Telangana's most marginalised women. Incremental policy tweaks within existing frameworks will not be sufficient; what is required is a comprehensive, intersectionally informed policy architecture that addresses these barriers in their compounded form.

The capabilities approach reminds us that the goal of higher education policy is not merely to get women through the institutional door but to create the conditions in which they can genuinely flourish as learners, thinkers, and future professionals. Telangana's education policymakers have an opportunity—and an obligation—to transform the state's impressive enrolment gains into equally impressive graduation outcomes, particularly for the women who have historically been most systematically excluded. Achieving this ambition demands not just financial commitment but institutional courage, normative challenge, and sustained political will.

Future studies ought to focus on longitudinal cohort, individual-level studies of the educational path of individual women, qualitative research on the lived experience of near-dropout and recovery, and robust impact studies of current retention initiatives. Such an evidence base will be indispensable for the adaptive, accountable policymaking that women's higher education in Telangana urgently demands.

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