

Women in Indian Academia: Resilience, Representation, and Reform: A phenomenological studyShivanshi Singh¹, Dr. Sangeeta Chauhan², Michael Tarance Suraj³, & Sonu Bara⁴DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17505382>

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Abstract: The study “Women in Indian Academia: Resilience, Representation, and Reform” investigates the lived experiences of women faculty in Indian higher education through a phenomenological lens. Despite notable progress in women’s enrolment approaching parity with men gender equity in academic leadership and decision-making remains elusive. Drawing upon semi-structured interviews with women academicians across universities in Lucknow, the research identifies three central themes: Representation, Resilience, and Reform. Findings reveal that representation in academia continues to be shaped by persistent gender stereotypes and sociocultural expectations that confine women to caregiving roles and restrict their professional advancement. Resilience emerges as a dynamic construct encompassing personal agency, emotional endurance, and reliance on familial and institutional support systems that enable women to persist despite systemic challenges. Reform, in contrast, underscores the necessity of institutional interventions gender-sensitive policies, infrastructural support, equitable access to research resources, and leadership pathways to dismantle structural barriers and promote inclusive academic environments. The study demonstrates that while individual resilience fosters women’s perseverance, sustainable gender equity requires structural transformation and cultural change within academic institutions. It contributes to feminist scholarship by centering women’s voices and highlighting the intersectional realities shaped by gender, class, and institutional hierarchies. By advocating for reforms grounded in empathy, inclusivity, and accountability, the research offers a roadmap for higher education institutions to advance from numerical representation toward genuine empowerment, thereby enriching the academic landscape and fostering social transformation.

Keywords: Women in academia, Gender Equity, Phenomenology, Resilience, Higher Education Reform.

Introduction: Higher education landscape in India has evolved considerably since independence and with time the women have progressively participated in higher education. The All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE 2022) indicates that women have now nearly 50 percent of all enrolments in university and college, which is a positive move in the right direction in respect of gender equality in higher education access. With the growth of women universities, affirmative policies and scholarships, women have new paths through which they can achieve academic careers. But, under this statistical advancement, stands a less remarkable fact. Although women can be found in the classrooms and on faculty lists, the number of women decreases significantly with the increase in the academic hierarchy. The level of representation in top faculty, research leadership and decision-making committees are still underrepresented. Academic institutions, which are often patriarchal in nature, still recreate gender discriminations in rather insidious but still consistent forms, affecting recruitment, promotion, research acknowledgment, and culture at work.

Women academicians in India navigate between various demands and limitations in this changing world (Khanna& Mukherjee, 2024). They tend to juggle work-related demands with family life, work on male networks, and struggle with unwritten beliefs concerning their abilities (Naz et al.,2025;). The academia culture and its emphasis on constant productivity and long working hours frequently conflict with social expectations of women. (Hall,1972).

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In spite of these obstacles, various women remain incredibly resilient, developing their academic personalities, researching and teaching, and advising other generations. Because of their stories, it can be seen that they do not merely reflect perseverance, but that there has been a continuing redefinition of the term woman scholar in changing India.

There has been an increase in enrolment and participation in Indian academia but there is still no real gender equity. The women are also stuck at mid-level positions and the realities they face are created due to the institutionalized sexism, disparate access to opportunities, and unavailability of leadership positions. The barriers that remain in the way of professional progress include structural barriers, such as gender stereotypes and low institutional support (Bain & Cummings, 2000). Such problems are aggravated by the overlapping issues of caste, class and geographical differences. Since women do not have much say in academic policy and reform, a kind of vicious circle of exclusion prevails, as representation substitute's true empowerment (Blackmore & Sachs, 2012).

This research will focus on the exploration and analysis of the lived experiences of women scholars in Indian universities in a phenomenological research study. It attempts to discern the way women interpret their careers and build significance on resilience, representation, and reform in academia. Focusing on the stories of women, the study will help to shed some light on the daily lives of the women concealed behind the walls of institutions, strategies of surviving and achievement, and learn more about the gendered academic life in India.

Review of literature: The involvement and leadership of women in higher education has changed the entire world and still, the gender imbalance exists in different geographical zones, subjects and even in the ranks of institutions. An increasingly large literature addresses the influence of sociocultural norms, institutional strategies and policy interventions on the access, experiences, and advancement of women across academia. As the next review, the synthesis of the world and regional research, which examines the changing trends of women in higher education, identifies the still existing obstacles and new approaches to gender equity.

The role of women in higher education in terms of their participation, representation and leadership has been extensively studied in global and regional levels. Nath (2014) used secondary data to track the increase in women enrolment in India that occurred between 10 percent in 1950 and 41.5 percent in 2010 and attributed the growth to less prejudice, scholarships and institutional support, and outlining the inequities that lingered among marginalized groups. On the same note, Llorens et al. (2021) reported systemic gender biases like unequal funding, biased recruitment and underrepresentation in publications, demanding double-blind reviews, mentorship and institutional restructuring. Discourse analysis of Black women professors in South Africa by Zulu (2020) identified that there was resilience in the face of racism and sexism, and in Bangladesh, in the study by Faruki (2023), women were empowered by their teaching experience, yet still, there were role conflicts and fewer promotions. In the UAE, Begum et al. (2024) quantitative study associated work-family imbalance with organizational and social demands, suggested flexible work models, and Bingham and Nix (2010) established persistent gender inequity in U.S. faculty. The invisibility of women in Indian academia was recorded by Chanana (2003) with respect to informal networks of male academics and unequal advancement hierarchy, and the participation of women in higher-education in the OECD countries was identified by Parvazian et al. (2017) as associated with the change of sociocultural factors including delayed marrying and higher work participation. Among the obstacles, which are outlined by Christman (2003), there were wage disparities and inequitable tenure, and he demanded mentoring and fair reforms. According to Castel et al. (2020), the participation in STEM in Ghana is uneven, but some efforts are developing, such as WiSTEMGh. Hemlata and Shinde (2014) demonstrated the importance of family and policy support that contribute to the education of Indian women. Alqahtani (2021) demonstrated that Saudi female leaders overcome the limiting cultural guidelines due to resilience and advocacy. Parker (2015) followed the history of the struggle of women in U.S. academia. In their study, Hoffart et al. (2021) concluded that the more women leaders there were in Canada, the less perceived discrimination. Mezza-Mejia et al. (2023) affirmed that inequities in global leadership are still present, which is supported by their systematic review, and that policies, mentorship, and systemic change should be based on data and be inclusive to ensure real gender parity in higher education. Taken together, these works indicate that although the role of women in the field of higher education has increased significantly, the structural and cultural barriers still limit their progress in the leadership and decision-making process. Development is different in contexts and it is influenced by the interaction of several factors like the classes, race and the institutional culture. To ensure a sustainable gender equity in the academia, we need reforms at all levels, policy level, institutional structure and cultural attitude, along with mentorship and accountability mechanisms. By establishing conducive and inclusive academic

systems, as is the case evidence in the world, it is important to make the acquisition of education by women a real empowerment and a leadership in higher education systems.

Research Questions

- How do women academics experience and describe resilience in their professional journeys?
- In what ways do they perceive and negotiate representation and visibility within their institutions?
- How do their experiences inform the need for or perception of reform in academia?

Research Objective

1. To explore the lived experiences of women academics in Indian higher education.
2. To examine how women academics experience and express resilience in navigating challenges such as gender bias, work-life balance, and institutional constraints in their professional journeys.
3. To analyze women's perceptions of representation and visibility within academic hierarchies, including their participation in leadership roles, research recognition, and decision-making processes.
4. To interpret how women lived experiences shape their understanding of institutional reform, including the need for gender-sensitive policies, supportive workplace practices, and inclusive academic cultures.

Research Methodology

Research Design: This study has used a qualitative phenomenological approach as research design to study the lived experiences of women academicians working in Indian higher education. The subjective meaning provided by the Phenomenological approach provide a way to understand how women construct meaning around resilience, representation, and reform within gendered academic structures. The design allows for deep engagement with participants' voices, highlighting both personal and collective dimensions of their professional journeys.

Population: The sample of this study is female faculty members in universities and institutions of higher learning in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. Faculty members of a broad spectrum of disciplines including sciences, humanities, social sciences, and education are encompassed in central, state, and private universities. Female members of different career levels such as early career lecturers, intermediate career lecturers and senior professors were sampled with a range of years of teaching and research experience.

Sample: Participants in this study were 10 to 12 women faculty members, who were chosen to take part in this study. They were selected to reflect a diversity of discipline, careers levels and geographical regions and social-cultural backgrounds. This was a diversity which made the study representative of a plurality of views and experiences and offered a well-rounded, textured insight into the real lives of women in the Indian academia.

Sampling Technique: The researcher used purposive sampling. This method enabled the researcher to select those respondents who had enough professional experience and were capable of offering valuable information on the phenomena being studied.

Data Collection: The participants were interviewed by means of semi-structured and in-depth interviews, each of which lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. The interviews will be either face to face or online according to the availability and preference of the interviewees. The interview guide had open-ended questions that covered the resilience, representation, and reform in academia. All interviews were automatically audio-taped and transcribed without any editing. Field notes were also maintained so as to record contextual information and non-verbal expressions. Ethical issues, including voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity, were followed by the researcher.

Data Analysis and Discussion: Data analysis followed phenomenological thematic analysis, based on the works of van Manen (1990) and Moustakas (1994). Transcripts were read repeatedly to identify significant statements, which were then organized into meaning

units. These units were clustered into broader themes Resilience, Representation, and Reform reflecting shared patterns and divergences across participants' experiences. The phenomenological thematic analysis of interviews with women academics revealed three major themes Resilience, Representation, and Reform that encapsulate the lived realities of women in Indian higher education. These overarching themes synthesize the participants' narratives, highlighting systemic barriers, personal strategies, and pathways for change. They interconnect to illustrate how women navigate academia amid conflicting professional, societal, and institutional demands. Each theme is explored below, drawing on direct quotes from responses, integrated with scholarly literature for deeper context and validation.

Representation: Representation is the cultural, social and stereotypical omnipresence that demands how women academics are viewed, discriminated and made invisible in Indian higher education. This theme shows deeply rooted prejudices that lead to the loss of the power, presence, and opportunities of women, which tends to support the old constructs of gender and narrows their professional representation. As a background to this misrepresentation, cultural and social expectations shape the aspect. The participants mentioned the social constructs that forced them to be homemakers and caregivers at the expense of academic goals. As it was pointed out, there is a partial overlap between personal and professional life. *"Women are (Compulsive and) more burdened than men and in most cases have more choices"* (Response 1). Early marriage or earning requirements in families are further interruptive: *"Women are either pressurized by the family to earn early or to get married, which poses a challenge"* (Response 2). *"Marriage becomes a detrimental obstacle and studies and responsibilities get complicated as: I am not allowed to do much after marriage as I am restricted by my in-laws. Studies and household were a challenge as well"*(Response 6). *"Such issues are enhanced by cultural practices such as dowry and strict roles"*(Response 8).

This is worsened by stereotypes and gender prejudices which are reflected in blatant and covert discrimination. Discriminations have not disappeared in male-dominated sectors: *"The views of society were problematic. It has been a scientific community prejudice that women cannot work hard or analyze"* (Response 4). Emotional stereotypes dilute credibility: *"Everyone has to go through preconceptions, being called an emotional. The abuse of emotions has caused women to be weakened"*(Response 8). Discrimination against voices is typical: *"In some cases, it did seem like my voice was discounted due to being a woman in the first place"* (Response 6); *"There has been discrimination indirectly"* (Response 1). They are consistent with Nath (2014) and Chanana (2003) who report the limitation of networks and leadership of women in the society due to the societal biases. Parvazian et al. (2017) reduce this internationally by demonstrating the existence of cultural norms that slow down the trajectories even as the participation increases. Underrepresentation in decisions is also a systemic issue noted by Christman (2003) and Titiloye et al. (2020). This theme highlights the issue of representation as one of the central problems, when the distorted perceptions restrict agency and exposure. To make the situation better, it is necessary to challenge the stereotypes based on the awareness and incorporation of the inclusion practice, which is needed to create the more realistic portrayal of the abilities of women in academia.

Resilience: The concept of resilience emphasizes individual and relationship responses that women have adopted that help them break through the barriers, such as agency, support networks, professional aspirations and work-life navigation. This theme does not depict resiliency as an inherent but a learned reaction and sustaining oneself through a difficult situation. They are centered on individual agency and personal fortitude. The respondents stressed the importance of over-preparation, confidence, and the development of skills: *"I have always been over prepared, and this made me succeed in the competitive ones such as UPPCS and Navodaya"* (Response 2) *"Confidence, skill development, and consistent preparation were the ones that helped me overcome such biases"*(Response 4). *"It is important to deal with challenges with courage Facing challenges in life should be done courageously"*(Response 5). *"Although there are family pressures, most of them endure long-term objectives"* (Response 6). This is reminiscent of Zulu (2020) and Faruki (2023) as resilience as empowerment in the face of structural barriers.

Resilience is enhanced by support systems. Family, spouses, in-laws, mentors, and colleagues are critical support: *"I am lucky to have supportive in-laws and a progressive husband who appreciated my career during my studies I was greatly assisted and inspired by mentors"* (Response 4); (Response 3). *"On the other hand, the lack of support discourages the progress"* (Response 6). Hemlata and Shinde (2014) and Alqahtani (2021) confirm the idea that networks have strong effects on trajectories.

Strong willpower is expressed in career aspirations and achievements. Women desire to be women leaders, researchers and impact the society: My best achievement is teaching. *This is the best motivation when you are remembered by students* (Response 1). *"The social*

work also makes it to the list of the post-retirement plans: After retiring, I would like to work as a social worker: to teach young children, to open a school” (Response 2).” *The ego on the success of things like Ph.D.s and promotions are high*” (Responses 4 & 5). As Parker (2015) and Hoffart et al. (2021) argue, institutional cultures are shifted by such contributions.

The problem of work-life balance puts a pressure on resilience, and childcare and home obligations become a stress on health and occupation: *“We cannot leave our children with maids, which became the further complication to the situation: It was stressful balancing between the family and the job equally”* (Response 1) *“The issues of work-life balance affected my health and career equally: Balancing family and work equally was difficult”* (Response 2). *“Divorce after marriage or birth are common”* (Responses 6 & 8). Bingham and Nix (2010), Begum et al. (2024), and Faruki (2023) attribute them to limited progression, but women exhibit adaptive measures. The concept of resilience is dynamic because it is a force of personal motivation, relational buffers, and goal-orientation persistence, which are key to success in an unsupportive environment. It demands institutional fostering of such aspects to carry on with the contribution of women.

Reform: Reform covers the institutional policies, resource and structural changes required to break down the barriers and facilitate equity. The participants reported the lack of implementation and unequal distribution of resources, and it was suggested that specific interventions were necessary to help women move forward. The institutional support and policies play a central role but are usually insufficient. There are schemes such as the Women Scientist Scheme and maternity leave, which are watered down by the cultures. Women are overloaded with extra responsibilities: *“Having Headship or Deanship responsibility requires adding additional time... Childcare facilities should be provided in institutions to children”* (Response 5). *“The infrastructure, including basic ones such as transport, restrooms, canteens, plays a crucial role in retention”* (Response 8). *“The differences are diverse: University-wide support is different; it is hard to find the balance between personal and professional life”* (Response 7). Bingham and Nix (2010), and Llorens et al. (2021) criticize poor implementation and unequal resources.

“There are professional development resources that develop skills and networks, including fellowship (e.g., CSIR NET) and conferences” (Responses 1, 5, and 6). *“The access is however not equal: Women-centric courses are available, however, as the respondent noted, institutional support of female employees is low”* (Response 4) *“priorities affect access”* to the institution (Response 2). Mezza-Mejia et al. (2023) and Christman (2003) emphasize the importance of distributing them equally to prevent the disadvantages. This theme signals the urgency of reforms: transparent policies, infrastructure upgrades, mentorship programs, and gender-sensitization. Robust support can bridge intent and impact, creating equitable spaces.

The themes of Representation, Resilience, and Reform illuminate a multifaceted landscape for women academics in India. Representation exposes biasing forces that distort women's roles and limit visibility; Resilience showcases adaptive strategies and support that enable navigation of these; Reform points to institutional levers for systemic change. Their interplay reveals how personal agency intersects with societal perceptions and structural deficiencies. While resilience empowers individual success, sustained equity demands reforms addressing representational biases through sensitization, inclusive policies, and resource equity—and bolstering supportive networks. This analysis, rooted in phenomenological insights, advocates for holistic interventions: cultural shifts, policy enforcement, leadership pathways, and mentorship. Ultimately, these themes offer a roadmap for transforming Indian higher education into a more inclusive domain, amplifying women's voices and contributions.

Finding and Conclusion: Phenomenological thematic analysis of the data collected through interviewing women scholars in Indian higher education turned out to be useful in uncovering three general themes Representation, Resilience, and Reform, which respond directly to the research questions on barriers, coping mechanisms, and equity pathways. Representation clarifies systemic misrepresentation in forms of cultural values and prejudices which marginalize women. The respondents emphasized family needs that force women into marriage and caring instead of pursuing a career (Responses 1, 2, 6), and that women are stereotyped as emotional or analytically weak in STEM disciplines (Responses 4, 8). This corresponds to Nath (2014) and Parvazian et al. (2017), which all prove biases limit networks and access to leadership.

Adaptive strategies such as personal agency, support systems, and aspirations are captured in resilience. Breakthroughs were made through over-preparation and strength (Responses 2, 4, 5), which was supported by mentors and progressive families (Responses 3, 4).

Teaching and social impact goals are high irrespective of work-life strains (Responses 1, 2, 6), which are justified by Zulu (2020) and Faruki (2023) as dynamic empowerment. Reform finds institutional gaps and remedies. Childcare, sensitization, and equal access to resources (Responses 3, 4, 5, 7, 8), are thus necessitated by policy gaps in schemes such as Women Scientist Scheme, inadequate infrastructure, and unequal access to professional development (Responses 3, 4, 5, 7, 8), the same theme is reflected in Loren's et al. (2021). These motifs relate: misrepresentation contributes to the obstacles, resilience alleviates the obstacles and reform perpetuates equity. Results promote the inclusion of holistic interventions in academia.

Conclusion: The thematic analysis of this research Representation, Resilience, Reform discloses the complex experience of female scholars in India, a mixture of structural injustices and empowerment stories. Representation exposes cultural and stereotypical misrepresentation that invisible women (Responses 1, 4, 6, 8); Resilience reveals agency and networks to generate endurance and perseverance under the work-life pressures (Responses 2, 3, 5); Reform entails the implementation of policy, infrastructure, and mentoring to support successful living (Responses 3, 5, 7). Basing their conclusions on the voices of participants and supported by Nath (2014), Zulu (2020), and Llorens et al. (2021), the authors succeed in proving that personal strength is not enough, and change must occur at the structural level. Barriers to Indian higher education should be broken by gender-sensitization, flexible policies, equal distribution of resources and pipelines to leadership. This study makes contributions to feminist literature by making women lived realities the centre that stakeholders need to increase the voices of different groups. In the end the fair reforms will unleash the talent of women to make academia and society richer with fair, creative future. Long term effects and comparisons with international situations should be a focus of future research.

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