



## **First-Generation Female Students in Bihar: Higher Education and the Struggle for Social Mobility**

**Aprna Kumari<sup>1,\*</sup>**

**<sup>1,\*</sup>Student, Department of Sociology, Mahatma Gandhi Central University, Motihari, Bihar, India**

### **Abstract**

This article explores the educational journeys of first-generation female students in Bihar, a state marked by poverty, caste hierarchies, and gendered restrictions. Drawing on twenty in-depth interviews and participant observation at Mahatma Gandhi Central University (2024-25), the study explores how economic insecurity, weak school foundations, patriarchal control, and the digital divide shape access to higher education. Findings show that women from Dalit and OBC backgrounds remain underrepresented, reflecting broader structural disadvantages reported in the Bihar Caste Survey (2022) and national datasets. Yet, higher education also emerges as a site of transformation; students reported increased confidence, symbolic capital within families, and aspirations for postgraduate study or government employment. Situating these narratives within Sen's capability approach, Bourdieu's theory of capital, and Dalit feminist perspectives, the study argues that education is simultaneously constrained and empowering. It enables social mobility and cultural recognition, while reproducing inequalities that demand structural reforms. The article concludes that higher education must integrate both redistribution and recognition if it is to serve as a tool of social justice.

**Keywords:** Higher education, first-generation students, social mobility, gender, caste, intersectionality

**Corresponding Author's email id. [arpnatripathi441@gmail.com](mailto:arpnatripathi441@gmail.com)**

### **Introduction**

Education has always been recognised as one of the most powerful instruments of social, economic, and cultural transformation. It has the potential to break intergenerational cycles of poverty, open doors of opportunity, and enable individuals and communities to move upward in society. By providing knowledge, skills, and confidence, education not only alters economic prospects but also reshapes social identities, expands freedoms, and broadens the possibilities available to those who were systematically excluded in the past. In India, higher education is often regarded as a pathway to modern citizenship, a source of dignity, and a gateway to social and economic upliftment. Yet the realization of this promise is far from uniform, as access and benefits are distributed unevenly across

regions, classes, castes, and genders. For first-generation learners, especially young women in rural and semi-urban Bihar, the path to higher education is marked by poverty, gender discrimination, caste hierarchies, and inadequate institutional support.

After independence, the Indian government expanded universities and introduced measures such as scholarships and reservations to make higher education more accessible to disadvantaged groups (Tilak, 2015). These efforts aimed to democratize education and give equal chances to all. However, inequalities have continued to shape who gets access and who succeeds (Nambissan, 2010). Even today, the state presents higher education as a key driver of

national growth, most recently in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, but many structural barriers such as poverty, caste discrimination, and gender inequality remain firmly in place (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008; Nambissan, 2010; Tilak, 2021).

Sociologists have long tried to explain why education, though often seen as a pathway of equality, continues to produce uneven outcomes. Bourdieu (1986) reminds us that success in higher education depends not only on hard work but also on the cultural and economic resources that students bring with them, which is why middle-class learners often feel at ease while first-generation learners struggle. Bernstein (1971) adds that language itself becomes a barrier, as students from rural and marginalized backgrounds find their ways of speaking and writing undervalued in academic spaces dominated by English. Feminist scholars such as Acker (1994) and Desai and Kulkarni (2008) show that these barriers are not gender-neutral, since women face additional restrictions linked to patriarchy, cultural burdens, dowry, and expectations of domestic roles. Building on this, Fraser (1997) argues that justice in education requires not only the redistribution of resources but also recognition of the identities and dignity of marginalized groups. Sen's (1999) capability approach shifts the focus to the freedoms that education can create, while Crenshaw's (1989) idea of intersectionality helps us see how caste, class, and gender combine to make exclusion even more complex. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that higher education is not a straightforward ladder of mobility but a field where inequalities and opportunities coexist a reality clearly visible in the experiences of first-generation female students in Bihar.

First-generation female students embody these challenges in direct ways. In many families, their education is questioned or interrupted because marriage or dowry is seen as more important. Concerns about safety and family honour often restrict their

freedom to travel or stay in hostels, while in some cases poverty limits their access to books, technology, and other resources. Yet, even with these barriers, higher education becomes a powerful source of change. It gives them self-confidence, broadens their aspirations, and brings respect to their families, as daughters' education is increasingly seen as a mark of pride and progress.

Recent studies show that the story of women's higher education in rural India is marked by both hope and struggle (Yadav & Kapoor, 2021). On the one hand, parents are beginning to imagine new futures for their daughters. On the other hand, in many contexts they encourage girls' education primarily to increase their value in the marriage market, where being educated is seen less as a path to independence and more as a quality that makes them suitable wives (Yadav & Kapoor, 2021). A 2023 survey by the Development Intelligence Unit revealed that nearly 78% of rural parents now want their daughters to complete graduation and beyond, a sign of changing aspirations and a slow shift in social attitudes (India Today, 2023). At the same time, many structural barriers continue to stand in the way. A recent IIT Patna study found that even when women perform well academically, they are often guided into so-called 'feminine' careers like teaching or nursing, while men are encouraged to pursue technical or managerial fields (Sinha et al., 2025). National data reflect these contradictions: the NFHS-5 (2021) survey shows that more than one in four rural women in India are still married before the age of 18, cutting short their education, while a recent report shows that only 18% of rural women travel alone for education or training (Yadav, 2024), underlining how restrictions on mobility remain a serious barrier to women's access to higher education. These findings suggest that although aspirations are rising, social norms and structural obstacles continue to hold women back. It is within this tension between new possibilities and old restrictions that the

experiences of first-generation female students in Bihar can be understood.

Against this backdrop, this article examines the experiences of 20 first-generation female students at Mahatma Gandhi Central University, Bihar. It asks, How does higher education shape their social mobility? What barriers constrain them? What supports enable persistence? By situating their narratives within sociological theories, the article illuminates the ambivalent role of education as both a site of exclusion and a source of empowerment.

### Methodology

This study was conducted in 2024-25 at Mahatma Gandhi Central University, Motihari, Bihar, a rural-urban transitional setting that attracts many first-generation learners. At the time of the study, approximately 450 first-generation female students were enrolled across disciplines.

### Research Design and Sampling

A qualitative research design was adopted to capture the lived experiences of students. Twenty participants were purposively selected due to time restrictions to reflect diversity across caste categories (SC, OBC, EWS, General), disciplines (arts, sciences, commerce), and living arrangements (hostel residents and day scholars). Sampling was guided by the principle of thematic adequacy, ensuring sufficient variation and depth.

### Data Collection

Data were gathered through:

- Semi-structured interviews (60-90 minutes each), focusing on family background, educational journeys, challenges, and aspirations.
- Participant observation in classrooms, libraries, hostels, and cultural activities to capture everyday interactions and contexts.

### Data Analysis

Interview transcripts and field notes were coded thematically using an open coding

process. Codes were then grouped into broader themes such as economic insecurity, patriarchal restrictions, mobility challenges, language and digital divides, caste intersections, empowerment, and aspirations. Percentages were used illustratively to highlight recurring patterns within the sample, while interpretation was informed by theoretical frameworks including intersectionality and the capability approach.

### Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained, and participation was voluntary. Reflexivity was practised through field notes and critical self-awareness, acknowledging the researcher's proximity to the field and its potential influence on interpretation.

### Findings and Discussion

For first-generation female students in Bihar, the path to higher education is rarely straightforward. It is shaped by constant struggles with poverty, gender restrictions, cultural burdens, and social expectations that prioritize marriage or dowry over learning. Concerns about safe travel often limit their mobility, while weak school foundations and the digital divide add further challenges to their academic journey. Even with so many restrictions, these young women do not stop. They find small ways to continue borrowing books, sharing phones for online classes, or convincing parents to let them travel. In doing so, they slowly build confidence, earn respect, and keep alive their hopes for a different future.

### Economic Insecurity and Fragile Mobility

For most respondents, money was the hardest barrier to cross. Their education depended heavily on government scholarships, and many said that without this support, continuing their studies would have been impossible. Families wanted their daughters to study, but with limited money, they found it hard to manage the cost of higher education, especially when resources were

limited. Bourdieu's (1986) idea of economic and symbolic capital helps explain this: while families faced financial strain, having an educated daughter also brought pride and social recognition.

In Bihar, these struggles are closely linked with cultural priorities. Families often see sons as future security in old age and therefore place their higher education first. Daughters, by contrast, are frequently viewed through the lens of marriage, where education is valued more for improving dowry prospects than for building independence. Many parents prefer their daughters to "have a degree" rather than an education, so they can be considered suitable brides, even if regular college attendance is discouraged.

These patterns echo larger trends. Bihar continues to have one of the lowest rates of higher education in the country only 2.9% of rural youth are able to attend university (USIPI, 2022). Policies like the NEP 2020 promise inclusivity, but without enough scholarships, affordable hostels, and support systems, the dream of equal access remains incomplete (Tilak, 2021).

### **Patriarchal Restrictions and Gendered Scripts**

For many students, family rules and social expectations placed strong limits on their freedom. Almost three-fourths of participants reported curfews, restrictions on living in hostels or outside home, and often close monitoring of friendships. In these households, education was accepted but not always encouraged as a means of personal or professional independence. Instead, a degree was often valued for its potential to enhance marriage prospects raising dowry value or making a daughter appear more "suitable." This aligns with Acker's (1994) observation that women's education frequently operates within patriarchal structures rather than challenging them.

Cultural and safety concerns often intensified these restrictions. Families emphasized "honour," fearing that unsupervised social interactions or living away from home could bring shame. Safety concerns, especially in unfamiliar urban spaces, were frequently cited to justify curfews or limitations on travel. Parental pressure also extended to career choices: many students were subtly guided toward "acceptable" professions like teaching or nursing, even when their academic strengths could have opened doors to other fields. Research from IIT Patna echoes these findings, showing that gender stereotypes continue to influence the professional trajectories of women, often steering them toward socially sanctioned roles (Sinha et al., 2025). For these students, the value of education was measured less by personal empowerment and more by its perceived benefit in negotiating social norms and marriage arrangements.

### **Weak School Foundations, Language, and Digital Divide**

The foundation of schooling strongly shaped how these students experienced university, with those from rural schools entering higher education at a clear disadvantage. Many students entered university after studying in under-equipped rural government schools, and this early disadvantage followed them into higher education. Among the twenty respondents in the study, their backgrounds varied significantly, four had studied entirely in rural government schools, seven attended schools in semi-urban areas, and the remaining nine came from better-equipped private schools like DAVs and Central Schools. This uneven educational landscape had immediate consequences when they reached university. Respondents who come from rural background reported facing difficulties in class struggling to speak in English or write assignments even though they clearly understood the subjects. Bernstein's (1971) idea of restricted versus elaborated codes explains this situation. Students educated in their local-language

carried limited communication skills into academic spaces where English is valued and dominant. This shows how language itself becomes a form of inequality in education, where English fluency is treated as a marker of merit, while local knowledge and ways of expression are undervalued.

The digital divide complicates these challenges further. During the COVID-19 pandemic, very few students had their own smartphones or laptops. This lack of private access reduced their independence and created gaps in learning. These individual struggles highlight structural inequalities. The National Statistics Office (2025) reported that 51.6% of rural women above the age of 15 still do not own a mobile phone, compared to far fewer men in the same age group. The gap is even sharper among adolescents as only 19.8% of rural girls aged 14-18 own a smartphone, compared to 43.7% of boys in the same age group (ASER, 2023). According to UDISE+ (2023-24), a mere 18.5% of schools in Bihar have internet access, while only 19.6% have functional computers. In fact, across all of Bihar's nearly 95,000 schools, only about 18% are equipped with working computers far below the national average and starkly contrasting with private institutions. These structural gaps left many students linguistically and technologically unprepared.

Together, this data shows that technological exclusion is not simply about owning a device, but about control, accessibility, and infrastructure. For first-generation female students in Bihar, the digital divide, including language barrier limiting both their access to learning and their ability to participate equally in higher education.

### **Caste and Intersectional Exclusion**

In Bihar, caste continues to shape women's access to higher education and their opportunities for social and economic advancement. Women from Dalit and Other Backward Class (OBC) communities are more likely to come from economically

disadvantaged households, making it harder for them to continue their studies. The 2022 Bihar Caste-Based Survey shows that 34.13% of households in the state earn less than ₹6,000 per month, with 42.93% of Scheduled Castes in this low-income group. These economic challenges, combined with social hierarchies, create multiple barriers that restrict educational attainment and limit upward mobility.

In a small student populations, the impact of caste is clear. Only 5% of female students belong to Scheduled Castes, and none are from Scheduled Tribes, showing the underrepresentation of these groups in higher education. The majority come from OBC and General Categories, reflecting broader statewide trends. Although female enrollment has improved, the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) for females rose from 10.5% in 2017-18 to 16.3% in 2021-22, with SC females increasing from 8% to 16.4%, yet caste-based disparities persist. Among graduates, only 3.12% are Scheduled Castes and 3.53% are Scheduled Tribes, compared to 14.54% from General Categories and 9.14% from Backward Classes. These figures highlight how structural disadvantages continue to limit higher education access for marginalised caste groups.

Using Crenshaw's (1989) framework of intersectionality, it becomes clear that these women face layered disadvantages. Their experiences are shaped not only by caste but also by gender and economic deprivation, creating overlapping forms of exclusion. Even when Dalit and OBC women enter universities, under-resourced schools, limited family income, and social stigma often reduce the benefits that higher education could provide.

It is evident that caste, gender, and economic disadvantage combine to limit how much Dalit and OBC women can benefit from higher education, even as overall female enrollment improves.

### **Education as Empowerment and a Pathway to Social Mobility**

Even where social and economic barriers are strong, higher education opens real possibilities for change. In Bihar, low household incomes and caste-based disadvantage limit many women's chances to study, yet those who reach college often report clearer ambitions, greater confidence, and new routes to better jobs. State data show that about one third of households in Bihar earn less than ₹6,000 a month, and Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe households are disproportionately represented among these low-income families. These conditions make access to higher education difficult for many, but for those who do enter college, education frequently becomes a turning point that expands choices and raises aspirations.

The rise in female enrolment at higher levels shows growing opportunity. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for females in Bihar has increased in recent years, signalling wider access to colleges and universities. This increase is significant because, across India, higher educational attainment is closely linked with better employment prospects and improved economic outcomes for women. Studies of intergenerational mobility find that daughters' educational attainment often exceeds that of their mothers, and that education is a strong driver of upward movement, though the extent of upward mobility varies by caste and region. These findings support the claim that education can shift life trajectories, especially for the first generation to attend college. These improvements are not only about numbers. As Sen's (1999) capability approach reminds us that, education does not only increase skills or income potential; it expands people's real freedoms to imagine different lives and to act on those visions. For many first-generation women, college enlarges what they see as possible to aspirations to postgraduate study, entry into stable government or professional jobs, and new ambitions for younger siblings. This expansion of capability is visible not just in

individual reports of confidence and public participation, but in measurable shifts in aspirations and occupational hopes documented in recent sociological work on first-generation learners in India.

Recent sociological studies confirm this pattern of mobility. Choudhary and Singh (2017) found that nearly 70% of young women in India experienced intergenerational upward educational mobility, with almost 80% of this movement being upward rather than stagnant or downward. Their analysis also highlighted that the gains were more visible for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, for whom education became a pathway to overcome long-standing exclusion, though barriers remained. Similarly, Deshpande (2019) shows that higher education among first-generation learners improves chances of formal employment and stable income, though caste continues to mediate outcomes. At the same time, other studies emphasise that even when women from Dalit and OBC backgrounds face limited employment options, education still transforms their social standing. Rege (1998) argues that Dalit women's access to higher education has symbolic significance: it challenges both caste and gender hierarchies by placing them in spaces historically denied to them. More recent ethnographies, such as Thapan (2023), highlight that while humiliation and subtle exclusion persist in universities, women still use education to claim dignity, respect, and visibility within and beyond their communities.

In short, higher education acts as both empowerment and a practical route to upward mobility for first-generation female students. It builds capabilities, raises aspirations, and improves employment prospects. The secondary literature shows consistent gains from education across India, while Bihar's data and caste-wise patterns explain why those gains are harder for Dalit and OBC women to realise fully. Framing education as capability expansion helps us

see why even limited access can produce important social and cultural shifts, while also pointing to the need for policies that address the extra barriers facing marginalised caste groups.

Higher education in Bihar thus emerges as a contested terrain. It constrains through poverty, patriarchy, caste, and language but empowers through aspirations, confidence, and recognition. Fraser's (1997) recognition-redistribution model captures this contradiction: redistributive measures exist, but recognition of marginalised identities within institutional cultures remains weak. Without recognition, redistribution remains partial.

These findings resonate with broader debates in the sociology of education in the Global South, where higher education is simultaneously an instrument of exclusion and empowerment. Bihar, therefore, offers a local lens onto global patterns of inequality and transformation.

### Conclusion

The experiences of first-generation female students in Bihar highlight both the promise and the limits of higher education. Their narratives reveal how economic insecurity, patriarchal expectations, weak school foundations, digital divides, and caste hierarchies continue to constrain access and participation. At the same time, higher education has opened new spaces of confidence, dignity, and symbolic capital, enabling young women to challenge established norms and broaden their life chances.

For these students, education is less a straightforward ladder of upward mobility and more a process of negotiation requiring family sacrifices, personal resilience, and everyday strategies of adjustment. Their persistence illustrates that higher education is simultaneously a means of survival and a pathway of empowerment.

The findings also point to the need for supportive measures that go beyond scholarships and reservations. Initiatives such as safer mobility for women, inclusive teaching practices, mentorship opportunities, and greater recognition of social diversity within institutions could strengthen the transformative potential of higher education. While the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4 on quality education and SDG 5 on gender equality) provide an aspirational direction, their success will depend on how far these commitments are grounded in lived realities.

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