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Research Paper

A Comparative Analysis of Educational Attainment Among Rural and Urban Women and Its Societal Impact: A Case Study of Jharkhand

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ABSTRACT

Education serves as a transformative force in society, yet its impact is unevenly distributed across regions and social groups. In Jharkhand, the educational attainment of women reflects a sharp rural–urban divide, deeply influenced by poverty, infrastructural inadequacies, cultural traditions, and tribal identities. While urban women increasingly access secondary and higher education, rural and tribal women continue to face barriers such as early marriage, domestic responsibilities, unsafe school environments, and limited institutional support. This paper examines the patterns of female literacy, enrollment, and dropout in Jharkhand, highlighting how socio-economic disparities, patriarchal norms, and geographic isolation hinder rural women's access to education. It also explores the societal benefits of women's education, including economic empowerment, improved health outcomes, and intergenerational progress. Government initiatives like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, and scholarship schemes are reviewed alongside grassroots interventions, with emphasis on implementation challenges and community participation. The study concludes that bridging the rural–urban educational gap requires integrated strategies—improving infrastructure, promoting cultural inclusivity, engaging communities, and empowering women through policy and practice. Strengthening female education in Jharkhand is not only essential for gender equality but also for the sustainable socio-economic transformation of the state.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education stands as one of the most potent engines of social transformation, unlocking the latent potential within individuals and communities. Nowhere is its influence more evident—and its deprivation more consequential—than in regions where gender, geography, and culture intersect to both empower and constrain women. In the state of Jharkhand,

located in eastern India, the landscape of female education is particularly nuanced. It is shaped not just by infrastructural and economic challenges, but also by deep-rooted traditions, tribal histories, and intersecting axes of privilege and marginalisation. The story of educational attainment among women in Jharkhand is in many ways the story of India's

ongoing struggle with equitable development, and it is here that the sharp divide between rural and urban realities is most apparent.

Jharkhand: The Social and Educational Context

Formed in 2000, Jharkhand is a land shaped by its hilly terrain, dense forests, and a rich tapestry of indigenous cultures. While its mineral wealth powers industrial centers in Ranchi, Jamshedpur, and Dhanbad, most of its people reside in rural areas, many of which are tribal-majority. These communities are marked by unique social, economic, and cultural patterns. Education in Jharkhand reflects these tensions—between modernity and tradition, between opportunity and exclusion, between aspiration and systemic barriers.

Despite significant investments in educational infrastructure over the past two decades, there exists a persistent and profound disparity between women in rural and urban locales. Urban centres benefit from government and private institutions, access to technology, a more educated parental base, and a social climate where the pursuit of education for girls is, if not universal, at least widely encouraged. In contrast, the rural hinterland, particularly tribal belts, often finds itself isolated from these winds of change. Rural schools are frequently under-resourced, lacking basic amenities such as safe buildings, separate toilets for girls, qualified female teachers, and transportation. The negative impact of poverty, prevailing patriarchal norms, and disrupted livelihoods—exacerbated by seasonal migration or subsistence agriculture—further contribute to the rural-urban educational chasm.

Educational Attainment: A Ground Reality

Recent studies paint a compelling, if troubling, picture. Across surveys capturing a broad demographic sample from both rural and urban settings in Jharkhand, the following patterns emerge:

In urban areas, almost 30% of women aged 18-35 have attained higher secondary education or beyond, and an additional 30% have graduated from college or technical institutions. Only about 5% of urban women report having no formal schooling at all. Contrasting this, in rural locales over 28% of women have never attended school, while another 32% have not progressed beyond the primary level. Just 10% achieve higher secondary education and a mere 5% go on to graduate-level studies.

The literacy rate tells a similar tale: as of the most recent data, urban female literacy stands at 77.5%, while in rural regions it lags behind at 55.2%. For many tribal areas of Jharkhand, the gap is even sharper. Girls may start school, but high drop-out rates prevail, especially at the primary to secondary school transition. Factors include distance, cost (for uniforms, books, transportation), early marriage, household responsibilities, and, often, resistance from older males or community elders who do not perceive the value or appropriateness of formal education for girls.

Voices from the Ground

The statistics, while vital, tell only one part of the story. Embedded within these numbers are voices—of young girls walking several kilometres to a distant school; of mothers who, despite their own limited education, aspire for something more for their daughters; of teachers navigating prejudice and infrastructural hurdles; and of social workers battling to retain girls in educational pipelines. In discussions with women from both urban and rural settings in Jharkhand, a common theme emerges: the transformative potential of education is universally recognized, but the ability to realize this potential is unevenly distributed.

Urban mothers often cited education as essential for securing respectable employment, personal dignity, and family advancement, pointing to growing spheres where girls excel—in sports, administration, and entrepreneurship. In contrast, rural mothers and daughters expressed hopes tinged with uncertainty: “If we had a secondary school nearby,” said one tribal woman from Gumla, “my daughter would not have to stop after class 8. But the road is not safe, and we cannot afford a hostel in the city.” Such voices illuminate the daily, lived negotiation between hope and hardship.

Why Does the Rural-Urban Gap Persist?

The roots of disparity are tangled and deep. Infrastructure remains a primary concern—rural areas typically lack sufficient schools, with buildings often in poor repair, lacking boundary walls, functioning toilets, adequate lighting, or female teachers. Safety concerns, especially during menstruation or for schools distant from villages, further impede attendance. Urban schools, by contrast, offer better resources, more extracurricular opportunities, and (crucially) a culture that increasingly values girls’ academic and extracurricular achievement.

Cultural barriers run alongside these logistical obstacles. Patriarchal norms, more deeply entrenched in certain rural and tribal communities, often dictate that education is secondary to marriage or domestic work. Here, daughters are viewed as economic liabilities, to be married off early—sometimes before legal age—rather than as future breadwinners or decision-makers. By contrast, even among urban poor, changes in attitude toward girls’ schooling are more evident, influenced by mass media, NGO interventions, and the lived examples of successful women in the same community.

Poverty and economic insecurity add another layer: many rural families rely on every member’s labour, meaning that girls are often pulled from school to help with agriculture, livestock, sibling care, or wage work. The opportunity cost of continued education—especially secondary and higher studies—can be daunting, more so when the returns are uncertain. Urban women, though not immune to economic pressure, at least have greater access to scholarships, public transport, and part-time work that makes continued education feasible.

Government policies—such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) initiative—have made significant impact, particularly by provisioning free or subsidized schooling, textbooks, midday meals, uniforms, and bicycle schemes. But challenges remain in program implementation, outreach, and the tailoring of curricular and co-curricular content to the needs of girls—especially tribal girls, who face language barriers and cultural mismatch in mainstream schooling.

Tribal Women: At the Intersection of Multiple Marginalities Nowhere is the complexity more apparent than in the educational experience of tribal women and girls in Jharkhand. For these communities, formal education is not just an economic or personal issue, but deeply cultural. Curriculum taught in unfamiliar languages, by teachers not native to the region, often fails to connect with tribal identities, aspirations, and daily realities. This has resulted in alienation, high absenteeism, and dropout rates that are among the highest in India. Initiatives such as Eklaya Model Residential Schools and special incentives for tribal girls are steps in the right direction but require greater investment in localized curricula, indigenous language instruction, and community participation to ensure real and lasting change.

The Societal Impact of Women's Education

The ripple effects of education are perhaps most keenly felt not just in the lives of individual women but across families, neighbourhoods, and entire communities. Multiple studies from Jharkhand and comparable states in India point to far-reaching, multi-generational impacts, both tangible and intangible.

Economic Empowerment and Mobility

Women with higher educational attainment are more likely to work outside the home, command better wages, and move from informal to formal sectors. In Jharkhand's urban areas, graduates find employment in schools, administrative jobs, private companies, and the growing IT and service sectors. Rural women, while still largely engaged in agriculture or informal labor, see increased bargaining power and household decision-making with even incremental advances in education. Economic empowerment also transforms family dynamics, reducing dependence on male relatives and offering a route out of multi-generational poverty.

Health, Nutrition, and Awareness

Education is directly correlated with improved health outcomes for women and children. Literate and educated women are more likely to access healthcare services, understand and apply health and nutrition information, and demand better standards of cleanliness and nutrition for their families. The likelihood of timely vaccination, antenatal care, and lower infant mortality grows sharply when the mother is educated—even at the primary or secondary level. Urban women, thanks to higher education, demonstrate markedly

greater health awareness and better family health indicators compared to their rural counterparts, whose restricted schooling often translates into poorer nutrition and health practices.

Empowerment and Reduction in Gender Inequality

Education is, at its core, a weapon against gender-based discrimination. Urban Jharkhand has, in the past decade, seen an upsurge in young women participating in civic life: voting, forming women's groups, contesting local elections, and advocating for their rights in the face of discrimination and violence. While rural women's participation in Panchayati Raj institutions, self-help groups, or social movements remains lower, recent interventions linked to education and literacy are beginning to reverse the long trend of marginalization.

Changing the Next Generation

Perhaps most critical, however, is the intergenerational impact wielded by educated women. Countless reports highlight that the children of mothers who have attended secondary school are far likelier to complete their own schooling. Educated mothers stress the importance of literacy, provide academic support at home, and model the value of knowledge and autonomy. In Jharkhand's urban centres this has contributed to rising girls' enrolment, shrinking dropout rates, and better overall performance. Rural areas, where so many mothers remain unschooled or semi-literate, continue to struggle—but pockets of progress demonstrate that when even one generation acquires education, the social contract permanently changes.

Policy Responses and Grassroots Movements

Recognizing the centrality of education to social progress, the Jharkhand government and civil society organizations have launched a multiplicity of initiatives over the past decade: Scholarship and stipend programs targeted at girls, including the Mukhyamantri Ladli Laxmi Yojana and tribal girl incentives.

Dedicated girls' hostels and residential schools for tribal and backward region girls.

Expansion of secondary and higher secondary schools in interior, hard-to-reach regions.

Community awareness programs on the value of girls' education, sometimes organized by NGOs or local Panchayats. Recruitment of local, especially female, teachers to create relatable and safe schooling environments for girls.

Integration of vocational training, digital skills, and financial literacy in secondary curriculum.

Yet for all this, systemic issues persist: gaps in information dissemination, bureaucratic inertia, teacher absenteeism, corruption, and local resistance to new ways of thinking. The most successful interventions have been those that involve communities—engaging elders, parents, and girls themselves in identifying obstacles and co-creating solutions.

Recommendations for Bridging the Gap

To bridge the persistent rural-urban divide in women's education in Jharkhand, experts and researchers recommend a multi-pronged approach: Permanent infrastructure upgrades, ensuring every hamlet and panchayat has a functioning, safe, and gender-sensitive school within easy reach.

Systematic recruitment and retention of local female teachers, supported with ongoing professional development and mentoring.

Consistent engagement with community leaders, breaking the silence around regressive practices such as child marriage and early drop-out.

Inclusion of local languages and culturally relevant content in early grades, to create a welcoming environment for both tribal and non-tribal girls.

Compulsory financial literacy, health education, and rights-based education as part of the curriculum from the middle grades upward.

Expansion of partnerships with NGOs, leveraging their expertise in last-mile outreach and community mobilization.

Strong monitoring and accountability systems to ensure that government schemes reach all intended beneficiaries, particularly in isolated tribal areas.

CONCLUSION

Education for women in Jharkhand is more than a development indicator; it is the key to unlocking social justice, economic growth, and sustainable community progress. Closing the gap between rural and urban women's educational attainment is not simply a matter of building more schools or providing more scholarships. It is about fostering a new social contract—one that values girls for their minds and futures as much as for their traditional roles within families.

When rural Jharkhand's girls stand shoulder to shoulder with their urban peers—when schools are filled with laughter, ambition, and hope, regardless of geography or social status—the state as a whole will have taken a giant stride toward genuine transformation. This is not just a pipe dream. It is an achievable, essential goal. The path is long but paved with evidence: where women and girls learn, families thrive, communities cohere, and every social and economic indicator moves upward. The future of Jharkhand, of India, depends on it.

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