



Female Literacy and Sex Ratio: A District-Wise Study of Kashmir Division

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ABSTRACT

Education is a foundational pillar for the holistic development of any civilization, and the role of women's education is central to achieving sustainable development. An educated woman empowers not only herself but also contributes significantly to the intellectual and moral development of future generations. Despite early initiatives in women's education dating back to the Vedic era, Kashmiri women have historically faced numerous challenges including illiteracy, patriarchal restrictions, domestic violence, and lack of institutional support. This paper investigates the historical evolution and present status of women's education in the Kashmir Division of the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir. It analyses district-wise sex ratios, female literacy rates, and identifies socio-cultural and economic barriers to women's education. Furthermore, it suggests remedial measures to improve female literacy and empowerment.

Keywords: Female Literacy, Women Empowerment, Sex Ratio, Patriarchy.

1. Introduction

Women's education is not merely a matter of justice but also a strategic investment in social development. The 1959 Committee on the Education of Women emphasized the need to consider women as equal partners in both private and public spheres. Education is a transformative force that uplifts not only individual women but also entire families and communities. The University Education Commission (1949) aptly noted that an educated woman is essential for an educated society, as she plays a crucial role in shaping the next generation.

Despite the constitutional and policy-level commitment to gender parity in education, disparities persist, especially in regions like Jammu and Kashmir, where women continue to encounter cultural taboos, limited access to institutions, and socio-economic disadvantages. The role of education in promoting women's autonomy, reducing dependency, and enhancing participation in the development process cannot be overstated. Thus, this study focuses on understanding both the historical trajectory and current status of women's education in Kashmir Division.

2. Significance of Women's Education

Female literacy is one of the most reliable indicators of human development. It is closely linked to improved health, economic productivity, and reduced fertility rates. The National Policy on Education highlighted that educating girls accelerates social transformation and ensures greater equity. Education allows women to assert their rights, participate in decision-making processes, and attain economic independence. It strengthens families, enhances moral values in children, and helps address long-standing social problems. In rural and conflict-ridden areas like Kashmir, women's education becomes even more vital, as it helps bridge socio-economic divides and fosters peace-building efforts.

3. Historical Evolution of Women's Education in Jammu and Kashmir

Efforts to educate women in Kashmir date back to the late 19th century. Between 1893 and 1895, the first girls' school was opened by Christian missionaries at Fateh Kadal, Srinagar. The initiative initially faced immense resistance from conservative elements in society. Rumors and public unrest led to a temporary closure, but it soon reopened with growing enrollment.

Prominent figures like Miss Churchill Taylor, Miss Stubbs, and Miss Goodall played a critical role in promoting girls' education during the early 20th century. In 1912, Miss Fitze established a girls' school that primarily catered to Muslim girls. She highlighted societal restrictions, particularly among Hindu families, where girls were withdrawn from schools before the age of 12. By 1914, public resistance began to wane as awareness spread. The number of schools increased, and by 1916, multiple girls' schools were operational. Reverend Biscoe commented that the progress in girls' education was more rapid than that of boys in earlier times and predicted significant social change once educated women became the norm.

In 1920, the Women Welfare Trust was established to promote female education and upliftment. The Trust opened schools for Hindu and Muslim girls, launched adult literacy initiatives, and offered vocational training. By 1933, it managed several schools across the city and appointed female inspectors to supervise education. In 1934, the Trust launched a full-fledged high school for girls. Vocational education was included, with training in tailoring and handicrafts, and social reform activities were encouraged through women's leagues and public debates. Government support in the form of grants and recognition of the Trust's role helped sustain these efforts.

4. Higher Education for Women in Kashmir Division

The journey of higher education for women in the Kashmir Valley began with great courage and determination. One of the pioneers, Mrs. Vimla Koul—popularly known as “Ammiji” was the first woman admitted to S.P. College, Srinagar. During the pre-independence era, female participation in higher education was minimal due to societal and cultural barriers. However, the landscape gradually changed after independence.

Post-1947, multiple policy initiatives were undertaken to enhance women's educational opportunities. These included the establishment of separate directorates for women's education, provision of scholarships, exclusive girls' schools in conservative areas, and recruitment of female teachers to make education more accessible and acceptable to families. These steps marked a turning point in women's access to higher education in Jammu and Kashmir. Still, despite the expansion of educational institutions, the gender gap remains significant, and access continues to be unequal across districts and socio-economic groups.

5. Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive analytical approach, combining both historical narrative and quantitative data analysis. It investigates the evolution and present status of female education in Kashmir Division, focusing on sex ratios and literacy rates as primary indicators. Secondary data was collected from the Census of India (1951–2011), government records, educational reports, policy documents, and previously published scholarly articles. Data on sex ratios and female literacy rates across different districts were extracted from official census databases and comparative reports on national and state trends.

Since the study is secondary in nature, it does not involve direct sampling. Instead, it encompasses all districts within Kashmir Division for which consistent data is available, including Srinagar, Budgam, Anantnag, Pulwama, Kupwara, Baramulla, and newly formed districts like Kulgam, Shopian, and Ganderbal, wherever data was present.

Variables Used

- Sex Ratio: Number of females per 1000 males.
- Female Literacy Rate: Percentage of literate females aged seven and above.

6. Data Analysis

District-wise sex ratios and female literacy rates were compared across three census years: 1981, 2001, and 2011. This comparative analysis helps identify patterns, progress, and regional disparities in female education and gender equity in the Kashmir Division.

6.1 Data Analysis and Findings

Table 1: Sex Ratio Trends in Kashmir Division

District	1981	2001	2011
Srinagar	873	871	900
Budgam	880	918	894
Anantnag	888	922	927
Pulwama	896	938	912
Kupwara	858	929	835
Baramulla	870	909	885
Kulgam	N. Est.	N. Est.	951
Shopian	N. Est.	N. Est.	951
Ganderbal	N. Est.	N. Est.	874

Source: Census 2011, N. Est. (Not Established)

In 2011, Kulgam and Shopian stood out by recording the highest sex ratios in the Kashmir Division, with each district reporting 951 females per 1000 males. These figures not only surpassed the Jammu and Kashmir state average of 889 but also exceeded the national average of 940, making them exemplary cases of gender balance. In stark contrast, Kupwara exhibited a troubling trend, with its sex ratio dropping sharply from 929 in 2001 to just 835 in 2011—the lowest in the region. This significant decline raises concerns about the re-emergence of discriminatory practices such as sex-selective abortions and gender-based neglect. Srinagar, however, showed gradual improvement over time, increasing from 871 in 2001 to 900 in 2011, likely due to better policy implementation and awareness in urban settings. Despite these varied trends, the overall sex ratio in most districts of Kashmir remained below the national average, highlighting the need for sustained efforts to promote gender equality.

Table 2: Female Literacy Rates in Kashmir Division

District	1981	2001	2011
Srinagar	24.66%	47.97%	63.47%
Budgam	8.02%	28.14%	46.60%
Anantnag	10.14%	31.51%	54.15%
Pulwama	9.21%	35.40%	53.81%
Kupwara	4.88%	26.83%	54.79%
Baramulla	9.57%	31.42%	55.01%
Kulgam	N. Est.	N. Est.	49.74%
Shopian	N. Est.	N. Est.	52.77%
Ganderbal	N. Est.	N. Est.	47.62%

Source: Census 2011, N. Est. (Not Established)

Srinagar consistently recorded the highest female literacy rate among all districts in the Kashmir Division, reaching 63.47% in 2011. Notably, Kupwara, which had a remarkably low literacy rate of just 4.88% in 1981, demonstrated the most significant improvement, rising to 54.79% by 2011. While this indicates considerable progress across the region, some of the newly established districts such as Shopian and Ganderbal still fall below the state average, highlighting uneven development. Despite the upward trend in literacy across all districts, the overall female literacy rate in the Kashmir Division continues to lag behind the national average of 65.46% (2011), pointing to the need for more focused educational interventions and equitable resource distribution to bridge the gender literacy gap effectively.

6. 2 District-Wise Data Interpretation: Sex Ratio and Literacy Trends

A focused analysis of the sex ratio and female literacy rate across various districts of the Kashmir Division reveals stark differences in gender-related progress. While some districts demonstrate steady improvements, others highlight persistent issues rooted in socio-cultural and economic barriers.

Table: 3 Sex Ratio Analysis (1981–2011)

District	1981	2001	2011
Srinagar	873	871	900
Budgam	880	918	894
Anantnag	888	922	927
Pulwama	896	938	912
Kupwara	858	929	835
Baramulla	870	909	885
Kulgam	N. Est.	N. Est.	951
Shopian	N. Est.	N. Est.	951
Ganderbal	N. Est.	N. Est.	874

Source: Census 2011, N. Est. (Not Established)

It is found that Kulgam and Shopian emerged as positive outliers in 2011, each registering a sex ratio of 951 females per 1000 males, which is notably higher than both the state and national averages of 889 and 940, respectively. In contrast, Kupwara presented a cause for concern, showing a sharp decline in its sex ratio from 929 in 2001 to 835 in 2011—the lowest in the region. This alarming drop may reflect a resurgence of regressive practices such as sex-selective abortions and neglect of female children. Srinagar, however, showed a promising improvement, increasing its sex ratio from 871 in 2001 to 900 in 2011, possibly indicating the effectiveness of awareness campaigns and policy measures in urban areas. Other districts displayed inconsistent trends, with no uniform pattern of growth, highlighting the uneven nature of progress and the need for district-specific strategies to address the underlying socio-cultural and economic factors influencing sex ratios.

Table 4: Female Literacy Rate Analysis (1981–2011)

District	1981	2001	2011
Srinagar	24.66%	47.97%	63.47%
Budgam	8.02%	28.14%	46.60%
Anantnag	10.14%	31.51%	54.15%
Pulwama	9.21%	35.40%	53.81%
Kupwara	4.88%	26.83%	54.79%
Baramulla	9.57%	31.42%	55.01%
Bandipora	N. Est.	N. Est.	46.24%
Shopian	N. Est.	N. Est.	52.77%
Kulgam	N. Est.	N. Est.	49.74%
Ganderbal	N. Est.	N. Est.	47.62%

Source: Census 2011, N. Est. (Not Established)

Srinagar consistently maintains the highest female literacy rate in the Kashmir Division, showing a steady rise from 24.66% in 1981 to 63.47% in 2011. This upward trend reflects better urban access to educational infrastructure, increased awareness, and sustained policy support. On the other hand, Kupwara, despite starting with the lowest literacy rate of just 4.88% in 1981, exhibited remarkable improvement by reaching 54.79% in 2011. This significant progress indicates the success of targeted rural literacy initiatives and community-level educational interventions. While all districts recorded improvement in female literacy by 2011, the overall literacy rate in the region still falls short of the national average of 65.46%. This disparity underscores the need for more focused efforts, particularly in newly established and remote districts, to bridge the remaining gaps and ensure equitable access to education for all women across the Kashmir Division.

7. Causes of Declining Sex Ratio

The declining sex ratio in certain districts of Kashmir poses a serious concern for demographic balance, gender justice, and the long-term social fabric of the region. Multiple structural, social, and cultural factors contribute to this imbalance:

7.1. Deep-Rooted Patriarchy and Son Preference: In many communities, sons are valued more than daughters for reasons ranging from inheritance rights to socio-cultural rituals. Sons are viewed as carriers of the family name, providers in old age, and participants in lineage continuity. Consequently, families often perceive daughters as a burden due to dowry traditions and limited financial return.

7.2. Female Foeticide and Pre-Natal Sex Selection: The availability of modern ultrasound and sex-detection technology has unfortunately facilitated pre-natal sex determination, often followed by abortions of female fetuses. Despite laws banning such practices, illegal operations continue in rural and urban areas alike.

7.3. Higher Female Child Mortality: Research shows that female children, especially those born after one or more sisters, are more likely to be neglected in nutrition, healthcare, and emotional bonding. This often results in higher mortality rates for girls.

7.4. Dowry System and Economic Burden: The entrenched dowry system in many parts of Kashmir treats daughters as financial liabilities. Families fear the burden of wedding expenses, leading to unconscious discrimination even before birth.

7.5. Lack of Women-Centric Policies and Gender Sensitization: Policy frameworks often fail to account for gender disparities at the grassroots. Poor implementation, corruption, and lack of monitoring further reduce the effectiveness of schemes aimed at gender equity.

8. Remedial Measures to Improve Sex Ratio and Gender Equity

The issues leading to a declining sex ratio are not insurmountable. Several strategic interventions can help reverse the trend and build a more gender-just society:

- 8.1. Legal Enforcement: Existing laws such as the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act, 1994 must be implemented more strictly. Regular raids on unauthorized diagnostic centers, sting operations, and quick judicial redressal mechanisms can act as strong deterrents.
- 8.2. Awareness Campaigns and Gender Sensitization: Mass media campaigns, street plays, school workshops, and community meetings should be conducted to shift societal mindsets. Grassroots initiatives that challenge traditional son-preference beliefs can have long-term effects.
- 8.3. Economic Incentives for Girl Children: Government schemes such as scholarships, conditional cash transfers, health coverage, and skill-based education for girls can motivate families to view daughters as assets rather than liabilities.
- 8.4. Role of NGOs and Civil Society: Non-governmental organizations, religious leaders, and local influencers must play an active role in advocating for girl child rights. Collaborative programs with government agencies can help reach marginalized communities more effectively.
- 8.5. Education and Financial Inclusion for Women: Providing free education, digital literacy, and vocational skills can ensure that women become economically self-reliant. Empowered women are less vulnerable to discrimination and more capable of resisting oppressive norms.

9. Suggestions for Strengthening Women's Education in Kashmir

To reduce educational disparities and foster gender equity, the following multi-pronged strategies are suggested:

- 9.1. Strengthening Rural Education Infrastructure: More primary and secondary schools need to be established in rural and remote areas. Mobile schools and transportation facilities can be introduced for difficult terrains and conflict-prone zones.
- 9.2. Appointing More Women Teachers: The presence of female educators can make schools safer and more welcoming for girls, especially in conservative areas. Special incentives should be provided to women teachers working in rural or backward regions.
- 9.3. Expanding Higher Education Access: New women's colleges and university campuses must be established across all districts. Distance learning programs, online courses, and scholarships can bridge the gap for girls who cannot attend regular classes.
- 9.4. Encouraging Community Participation: Village education committees, parent-teacher associations, and women's self-help groups should be mobilized to monitor school functioning and promote female literacy at the grassroots.
- 9.5. Curriculum Reform and Life Skills Education: Curricula should include gender studies, life skills, sexual health, and rights education, enabling girls to make informed decisions about their lives and futures.

10. Conclusion

The journey of women's education in the Kashmir Division has evolved from social resistance to gradual acceptance, marked by both progress and persistent challenges. Historical efforts by missionaries, trusts, and reformers laid the foundation, but it was only after independence that sustained governmental initiatives accelerated access to education for girls. Yet, despite visible improvements in female literacy across districts, a evident gender gap persists in both education and demographic indicators like sex ratio. The data reveals that while literacy rates have improved across all districts, the sex ratio in some areas has declined, notably in Kupwara. This dichotomy reflects the complex interplay of education, culture, economy, and gender-based discrimination. To ensure inclusive and equitable growth, it is essential that women's education is not treated as a mere social welfare measure, but as a core developmental strategy. A literate, aware, and empowered female population can catalyze social reform, economic resilience, and democratic participation. As the region continues to emerge from conflict and sociopolitical uncertainty, empowering its women through healthy, accessible, and quality education will not only uplift individual lives but also shape a more just and progressive society.

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