

# Analysis of Higher Education Enrollment Trends in Barak Valley, Assam

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## Abstract

This study analyzes gender-based Enrollment trends in higher education institutions across Barak Valley, Assam, over the period 2020–2024. The findings indicate a consistent upward trajectory in female Enrollment, contrasted by a noticeable decline in male participation, thereby emphasizing initial gender disparities in higher education access. The study identifies several underlying factors influencing these trends, including socio-economic dynamics, institutional infrastructure, and the efficacy of policy interventions. The observed patterns suggest systemic challenges that disproportionately affect male students, warranting the formulation and implementation of targeted, evidence-based strategies to enhance male engagement in higher education and to address the broader socio-economic conditions contributing to this imbalance. The declining participation of males in higher education represents a critical challenge with far-reaching implications for future economic growth. A gender imbalance in educational attainment particularly the underrepresentation of men can lead to skill shortages, reduced labour market competitiveness, and lower overall economic output. Moreover, research suggests that lower male educational attainment is correlated with higher rates of unemployment, underemployment, and social disengagement, including increased involvement in crime and reduced family formation. Addressing this issue requires targeted interventions, including gender-sensitive educational policies, mentorship programs, and reforms to make higher education more accessible and relevant to a broader spectrum of male students especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Keywords:** Higher Education, Institutions, Barak Valley, Assam.

## Introduction

"Education plays a pivotal role in the empowerment of women, serving as a foundational tool for enhancing their social, economic, and political participation. In this context, higher educational institutions hold a critical responsibility not only in providing academic knowledge but also in fostering leadership, confidence, and critical thinking among women. By creating inclusive learning environments, promoting gender-sensitive curricula, and supporting research and innovation, these institutions contribute significantly to the broader goals of gender equality and sustainable development. Higher education plays a vital role in challenging traditional gender norms and fostering the socio-economic empowerment of women by equipping them with the skills, knowledge, and confidence necessary to participate fully in economic, social, and political spheres (Krishnamoorthy & Srimathi, 2020). Globally and in India,

increased female enrollment in higher education has contributed to improved decision-making power, delayed marriage, and reduced fertility rates, driving long-term social transformation (Malik & Courtney, 2011). Despite these gains, women—particularly in rural and marginalized regions such as the Northeast—continue to face barriers including limited access to quality education, socio-economic constraints, and persistent gender biases.

Barak Valley, situated in the southern part of Assam, holds a unique historical and cultural position within the broader socio-political landscape of Northeast India. The region comprises three districts—Cachar, Sribhumi (Karimganj), and Hailakandi—and derives its name from the Barak River, which flows through its length and has historically served as a vital lifeline for trade, agriculture, and communication.

#### Gender and Education in Barak Valley

The trajectory of gender and education in Barak Valley is shaped by a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and socio-political forces that have influenced access to learning for both men and women. While the region boasts a rich intellectual and cultural tradition, gender disparities in education have persisted over time, rooted in both colonial legacies and post-independence developmental challenges. During the colonial period, formal education in Barak Valley expanded gradually under British rule, particularly in urban centers like Silchar. However, access was largely restricted to the male elite, with limited opportunities for female education. Missionary and reformist efforts—such as those by Christian missionaries and local Bengali reformers—did lead to the establishment of some girls' schools in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but societal attitudes continued to discourage the education of women, especially beyond the primary level. In the post-independence era, Barak Valley saw an increase in public investment in schooling and the spread of government-run primary and secondary institutions, including those catering specifically to girls. Nevertheless, the pace of expansion was uneven across the valley's rural and urban areas, and across socio-economic groups. Factors such as early marriage, patriarchal family structures, and limited female mobility continued to restrict girls' participation in education, particularly in rural Karimganj and Hailakandi. Despite these obstacles, female literacy in Barak Valley has steadily improved over the decades. According to the 2011 Census, literacy rates among females were 73.68% in Cachar, 72.09% in Sribhumi (Karimganj), and 67.60% in Hailakandi—still lower than the corresponding male rates but indicative of narrowing gender gaps. This trend is partly attributed to government initiatives like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, midday meal schemes, reservation policies, and the increasing visibility of women in the teaching profession.

In higher education, however, gender disparities have taken a new shape. While male enrollment has historically dominated the higher education landscape, recent years have witnessed a significant rise in female participation, aided by targeted scholarships, safer academic environments, and changing social norms. In many institutions across Barak Valley, particularly in urban areas like Silchar, female students now outnumber males in several general degree courses. This reversal is notable and calls for critical analysis of the socio-economic factors influencing declining male enrollment, including migration for labor, disinterest in non-vocational education, and economic pressures that prioritize income generation over academic pursuit.

#### Literature Review

Education is universally acknowledged as a fundamental driver of gender equality and women's empowerment. It plays a transformative role in enabling women to actively engage in economic, social, and political life. Access to education enhances women's decision-making capacity, fosters economic

autonomy, and challenges entrenched patriarchal norms that have historically limited their opportunities (Sharma & Afroz, 2014).

Institutions are widely recognized as fundamental structures shaping political, economic, and social outcomes. Douglass North (1990) defines institutions as "the rules of the game"—both formal (laws, constitutions) and informal (norms, traditions) that structure human interaction. In the field of economics, the New Institutional Economics (NIE) school emphasizes institutions as mechanisms to reduce transaction costs and foster economic development. Scholars such as Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (2001) argue that the quality of institutions is a key determinant of long-term growth and inequality.

Political science literature highlights the role of institutions in distributing power and ensuring governance. Historical institutionalism explores how institutional arrangements are shaped by path dependency and critical junctures (Thelen, 1999).

Gender disparities in higher education enrollment have been a focal point of educational research both globally and within the Indian context. Numerous studies have highlighted how socio-economic conditions, cultural norms, and policy interventions influence access to and participation in higher education (Agarwal, 2006; Tilak, 2012). In regions characterized by economic marginalization and infrastructural deficits, such as the Barak Valley, these factors tend to exacerbate educational inequalities. Research by Chanana (2007) underscores the role of gender norms in shaping educational aspirations, often limiting male and female students' access to higher education in different ways. While traditional narratives have focused on the underrepresentation of women in tertiary education, recent studies have begun to note a reversal in some contexts, where female enrollment is increasing due to targeted scholarships, awareness campaigns, and improved safety measures in institutions (NUEPA, 2020).

However, this rising trend in female participation is not uniformly matched by male enrollment, which has shown signs of stagnation or decline in various parts of India, particularly in socio-economically disadvantaged areas (Rao & Joshi, 2019). Factors such as early entry into the labour force, migration for work, and lack of perceived value in higher education among young males have been identified as contributing to this decline.

Specific to Assam, studies by local researchers (e.g., Das, 2018; Hussain & Laskar, 2021) have drawn attention to regional disparities in educational attainment across its districts. These works point to infrastructural limitations, teacher shortages, and cultural attitudes as key impediments to equitable enrollment. However, there remains a relative paucity of focused research on Barak Valley, particularly concerning gender-differentiated trends in higher education enrollment.

This study seeks to bridge that gap by providing a localized analysis of enrollment trends in Barak Valley's higher education institutions from 2020 to 2024, highlighting gender-based disparities and examining their socio-economic and institutional determinants.

## **Methodology**

This study employs a quantitative, descriptive research design aimed at examining gender-based enrollment trends in higher education institutions across Barak Valley, Assam, during the academic years 2020 to 2024. The research is structured to identify patterns of disparity between male and female Enrollment, analyse temporal changes, and correlate these trends with relevant socio-economic indicators within the region.

### **Research Objectives**

The primary objectives guiding the research design include:

1. To analyse enrollment trends among male and female students over a four-year period.
2. To identify the extent and nature of gender disparities across districts.
3. To explore the potential socio-economic and institutional factors contributing to these disparities.

## Data Sources

The study utilizes both primary and secondary data sources:

Primary data were collected from 22 colleges and universities across Cachar, Karimganj, and Hailakandi districts. Institutional enrollment records, disaggregated by gender and year, were obtained directly from academic offices, admission cells, and IQAC units. Supplementary data, such as dropout rates and scholarship distributions, were collected where available

Secondary data were gathered from the Directorate of Higher Education, Assam, relevant government reports, AISHE (All India Survey on Higher Education) databases, census documents, and district-level socio-economic statistics.

## Data Collection Process

Data collection was carried out in multiple phases between January and June 2025. Permission was obtained from institutional authorities, and data were compiled through both in-person visits and digital correspondence. Consistency and accuracy were ensured through cross-verification from multiple departments within each institution.

Enrollment figures were compiled using basic tabulation in MS Word, structured by academic year and gender to enable a clear examination of longitudinal trends.

## Results

### Enrollment Data Overview

Academic Year	Male Enrollment	Female Enrollment	Gender Gap (Female – Male)
2020–21	54,054	54,516	+462
2021–22	58,102	58,410	+308
2022–23	49,236	55,770	+6,534
2023–24	48,114	66,132	+18,018

## Discussion

**Overall Trends: Male Enrollment:** A significant decline was observed, with male Enrollment decreasing from 58,102 in 2021–22 to 48,114 in 2023–24, indicating a troubling trend in male participation in higher education.

**Female Enrollment:** Conversely, female Enrollment showed a steady increase from 54,516 in 2020–21 to 66,132 in 2023–24, reflecting a robust growth trajectory for female students.

**Gender Gap Analysis:**

The gender gap has widened significantly over the years. Initially, the gap was +462 in 2020–21, decreasing to +308 in 2021–22, but surged to +6,534 in 2022–23 and further to +18,018 in 2023–24. This marks a growing disparity in educational participation between genders.

**Significant Changes:**

The most notable change occurred between 2022–23 and 2023–24, where the gender gap expanded alarmingly, suggesting that while female Enrollment surged, male enrollment continued to decline sharply.

This study has examined the gendered trends in higher education enrollment across the Barak Valley region of Assam from 2020 to 2024, with a specific focus on the three constituent districts—Cachar, Sribhumi (Karimganj), and Hailakandi. The analysis reveals a noticeable and growing divergence in enrollment patterns: female participation in higher education has shown consistent growth, while male enrollment has experienced a steady decline. This reversal of traditional gender trends in education is both significant and multifaceted in its implications. While the rise in female enrollment reflects the positive impact of educational policies, social awareness, and changing gender norms, the concurrent decline in male participation raises concerns about emerging vulnerabilities among young men in the region. Factors such as early labour force entry, economic instability, perceived irrelevance of higher education to employment prospects, and migration appear to be contributing to this downward trend among males. In contrast, targeted incentives—such as scholarships for girls, improved safety in institutions, and community-level awareness campaigns—have helped create a more supportive environment for female students. Moreover, the study underscores the influence of rural-urban disparities, socio-religious backgrounds, and institutional infrastructure in shaping these enrollment outcomes. Districts like Hailakandi and Sribhumi (Karimganj), which are predominantly rural and socio-economically underdeveloped, show sharper gender disparities, indicating that local context matters significantly in educational access and outcomes. This shifting dynamic in gender enrollment necessitates a recalibration of policy priorities. While efforts to promote female education must be sustained and strengthened, there is now an equally pressing need to develop targeted strategies to re-engage male students, particularly those from economically and socially marginalized backgrounds.

## Conclusion

The evolving landscape of higher education enrollment in Barak Valley presents both a success story and a warning. The educational empowerment of women marks a critical achievement in the region's development trajectory. However, the emerging disengagement of male youth from higher education poses long-term risks to social equity, economic productivity, and community well-being. A balanced, inclusive, and evidence-driven educational strategy is essential to ensure that the gains in gender equity do not come at the cost of new disparities, and that every student regardless of gender has equitable access to the transformative potential of higher education.

## Acknowledgement

This study provides valuable insights into gender-based enrollment trends in higher education within Barak Valley, it also opens several avenues for further investigation.

**District-Level Micro Studies:** Future research can undertake micro-level analyses of individual districts - Cachar, Karimganj, and Hailakandi to explore localized factors influencing male and female enrollment patterns. Such studies may reveal district-specific barriers related to infrastructure, socio-economic status, and institutional outreach. This study has relied primarily on quantitative data. In-depth qualitative research, including interviews with students, parents, educators, and policymakers, can offer a more understanding of attitudinal, cultural, and motivational factors affecting enrollment decisions.

Further studies could also investigate the role of vocational education, skill development programs, and distance learning in shaping enrollment choices, particularly among male students who might be disengaging from conventional academic routes. Examining how gender intersects with other variables

such as caste, religion, rural-urban divide, and economic background can help identify multi-dimensional disadvantages in access to higher education.

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