



Women participation in higher education administration in Delhi–NCR: Barriers, agency, and the long road to equitable leadership

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Abstract

Women in the Delhi National Capital Region (NCR) have made remarkable strides in accessing higher education as students, yet their ascent into senior administrative positions within universities and colleges tells a profoundly different story. This study investigates the conditions that enable or obstruct women's entry into, and progression through, the administrative hierarchies of higher education institutions across Delhi NCR. Combining semi-structured interviews with 42 women holding administrative positions – spanning Principals, Deans, Registrars, and Heads of Department – across 18 institutions of varied character and funding models, with secondary analysis of All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) data from 2020 to 2023, this paper maps a persistent and troubling gap between the region's strong record on women's educational access and its notably weaker performance on women's institutional authority. Four interconnected themes emerge from the analysis: the quiet but consequential power of structural gatekeeping embedded in institutional procedures; the ongoing pressure of gendered social expectations that shapes how women navigate professional ambition; the paradoxical experience of being simultaneously over-exposed and under-recognised in administrative life; and the varied, inventive ways in which women carve out leadership influence despite unfavourable institutional conditions. The paper concludes that closing this gap demands more than goodwill from individual leaders – it calls for deliberate institutional redesign, including transparent appointment mechanisms, sustained mentorship infrastructure, intersectionality-aware policy, and a frank examination of the cultural assumptions that continue to determine whose leadership is treated as self-evident.

Keywords: Women administrators, higher education leadership, gender inequality, Delhi NCR, institutional culture, glass ceiling, India, intersectionality

Introduction

There is a particular kind of dissonance that anyone paying close attention to Indian universities will recognise. On convocation days and in institutional brochures, women scholars are celebrated as inspiration and proof of progress. Yet the offices from which those same institutions are governed – the Vice-Chancellor's chamber, the Registrar's desk, the Dean's meeting room – remain, in most cases, occupied by men. This gap between ceremonial acknowledgement and structural reality is not incidental. It reflects something deeper about how leadership is imagined, allocated, and reproduced within Indian academic institutions, and it is the central concern of this paper.

At first glance, the statistical picture of women in Indian higher education seems encouraging. According to Ministry of Education data (2023), women now account for 48.1% of all students enrolled in higher education across India – a figure that would have seemed extraordinary just two decades ago. Yet the same data, examined more carefully, reveals how little this enrolment transformation has touched the upper floors of academic governance. AISHE figures for 2022–23 show that women hold only 29.4% of all Principal positions nationally, and fewer than one in five Vice-Chancellorships. In Delhi NCR, a region that hosts some of the country's most prominent and well-resourced universities, the numbers are slightly better but follow the same downward curve as one moves from student enrolment toward institutional authority.

Delhi NCR commands attention as a research site precisely because it cannot be written off as educationally or economically peripheral. The region is home to the University of Delhi, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia

Millia Islamia, Ambedkar University Delhi, and a rapidly growing constellation of private universities. Female literacy in the region stands at approximately 80.9% (Census projections, 2021), among the highest in the country. Institutional funding, research infrastructure, and faculty qualifications are, relative to much of India, substantial. If structural and cultural barriers to women's administrative leadership persist here, as this study demonstrates they do, then the problem is not a matter of insufficient development but of how institutions are organised, whom they reward, and what stories they tell about leadership.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section two surveys the academic literature on women's leadership in higher education, drawing on both international research and work specific to the Indian context. Section three describes the theoretical foundations guiding the analysis. Section four outlines the research design and methods. Section five presents the study's central findings through four thematic clusters, giving sustained attention to participant voices throughout. Section six draws out recommendations for institutional actors, governing bodies, and regulatory agencies. The paper closes with a reflection on what genuine transformation requires and what it would make possible.

Review of Literature

International Scholarship on Women and Academic Leadership

Concern about the underrepresentation of women in academic leadership is neither new nor geographically contained. Since the 1990s^[6], scholars across North

America, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific region have produced a rich body of research examining why women, despite achieving educational credentials comparable to or exceeding those of their male peers, continue to be absent from the upper echelons of university governance. Several conceptual threads run through this literature.

A foundational line of argument holds that universities are not neutral institutions into which women simply need to be admitted in greater numbers. Rather, the rhythms, expectations, and reward structures of academic careers were historically built around the working patterns of men who had full-time domestic support at home. Acker and Armenti (2004)^[1] documented how women academics were compelled to manage caregiving responsibilities alongside career demands for which institutional accommodation was minimal or nonexistent, producing systemic disadvantages in research output, publication records, and ultimately in candidacy for senior positions. Bailyn (2003)^[3] pushed this argument further, contending that the problem resided not in individual women's choices but in the way, universities had structurally encoded a particular kind of worker – one who could subordinate personal and family life entirely to institutional demands – as the professional ideal.

The metaphor of the "leaky pipeline" became widely used in policy circles to describe the progressive attrition of women from academic hierarchies at successive career stages. Morley (2014)^[14] offered an influential critique of this framing, arguing that it directed attention to the flow of women through institutions rather than to the institutional properties that enabled that attrition in the first place. The question, she suggested, was not simply how to retain more women at each stage but why universities were so systematically less hospitable to women's careers than to men's.

Work from the United Kingdom, particularly research associated with the Athena SWAN programme, has tracked gender disparities at the professorial and administrative levels even as doctoral attainment approaches parity (Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019). In Australia, Blackmore (2002)^[5, 18] observed that waves of managerial reform in the university sector had paradoxically deepened rather than dismantled gendered divisions of institutional labour, with women disproportionately shouldering the relational, pastoral, and service dimensions of academic work while men retained control of the strategic and reputational functions. Research from Japan has similarly found that women academics were consistently steered toward teaching and welfare responsibilities that consumed the time required to build the research profiles on which promotion depends (Barnard *et al.*, 2012)^[4].

The Indian Academic Context

Within India, scholarly engagement with women's administrative representation in higher education has deepened considerably over the past two decades, though important empirical gaps remain. Chanana (2000)^[8], in a foundational survey of women's participation in Indian higher education, observed that the formal legal architecture of gender equality had never been matched by substantive institutional change, particularly in the Hindi belt states of northern India. Caste, class, and community identity, she argued, intersected with gender to produce highly varied – and often severely constrained – access to higher education and professional advancement.

Rege (2008)^[16] brought a critical feminist lens to the question of knowledge production within Indian universities, examining how institutional cultures that presented themselves as meritocratic and knowledge-driven were, on closer inspection, deeply shaped by Brahminical social hierarchies. These hierarchies did not merely disadvantage women in general; they disadvantaged women from lower castes and marginalised communities with particular severity, filtering out those whose social location least matched the tacit profile of the 'legitimate academic.' This argument carries direct relevance for Delhi NCR, where access to the most prestigious and resource-rich institutions continues to be mediated by social networks whose composition is far from caste-neutral.

Mukhopadhyay and Seymour (2015)^[15] contributed important empirical grounding to these theoretical concerns, drawing on survey data from women faculty across five Indian cities to show that overt discrimination had become less visible in recent decades even as subtler exclusions persisted: ideas dismissed in meetings, contributions attributed to male colleagues, pastoral roles accumulated without professional recognition, and promotion decisions made on criteria that appeared neutral but systematically penalised women's career patterns. Singh's (2019)^[17] research within the University of Delhi system added institutional specificity to this picture, finding that women Heads of Department reported a substantially heavier burden of what she termed invisible service work – tasks that sustained institutional functioning but carried little weight in formal career advancement.

Delhi NCR as a Study Context

Delhi NCR presents a uniquely layered institutional environment. The co-presence of central government universities, state-funded colleges, private deemed universities, and affiliated colleges under multiple affiliating bodies creates significant heterogeneity in governance structures, funding adequacy, and organisational culture. This plurality matters because the institutional conditions that shape women's administrative careers vary considerably across this landscape.

AISHE data for Delhi state and the wider NCR district footprint (2022–23) indicate that women constitute 46.2% of total student enrolment, 31.6% of all teaching staff, and approximately 22–26% of senior administrative role-holders, with the precise figure depending on how institutional type is disaggregated. Women's colleges, where there is a long tradition of female Principalship, record higher proportions; science, technology, and management institutions record lower ones. This variation is itself analytically informative, pointing to the role of institutional history and disciplinary culture in shaping who is considered eligible for administrative authority.

Theoretical Framework

This study approaches women's administrative experiences in higher education through three mutually reinforcing theoretical perspectives, each of which illuminates a different dimension of the conditions that shape those experiences.

The first perspective draws on the sociological framework developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1990)^[6], particularly his concepts of social field, habitus, and capital. A higher education institution can be understood as a social field with

its own internal logic – its own definitions of what constitutes valuable knowledge, credible authority, and legitimate ambition. Within this field, different forms of capital (intellectual, institutional, social, relational) are not equally accessible to all actors; their distribution is shaped by the historical and social conditions in which the field evolved. The concept of habitus – the set of internalised dispositions that orient individuals toward certain possibilities and away from others – is particularly useful for understanding why many women administrators in this study described experiences of self-limitation or automatic deference that they themselves found difficult to explain: these are not simply personal failings but the embodied traces of a field that has historically categorised them as peripheral.

The second perspective is feminist institutionalism (Mackay *et al.*, 2010) ^[12], which holds that gender does not exist outside institutions but is actively produced and reproduced through them. Formal rules such as appointment criteria and promotion guidelines carry gendered implications that may not be visible in the language of the rules themselves. Informal norms – about who speaks authoritatively, whose knowledge counts, how ambition is gendered – operate alongside and sometimes in contradiction with formal structures. An institutional approach directs analytical attention to these layered dynamics rather than treating institutional behaviour as the aggregate of individual choices.

The third perspective is intersectionality, developed in foundational work by Crenshaw (1989) and elaborated by Collins (2000) ^[9, 10] and others. This framework insists that social disadvantages are not additive but mutually constitutive: the experience of being a woman in Indian academic administration is not separable from the experience of caste, religion, marital status, age, and regional origin. In a social context as hierarchically complex as Delhi NCR, analysing gender in isolation would produce a distorted and ultimately unhelpful account. Throughout the analysis, this study therefore attends to the ways in which different social positions intersect to produce distinct and varied administrative experiences.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study is grounded in a qualitative research design. The decision to foreground in-depth, experience-near data was not merely methodological preference but epistemological commitment: the aim was not to count the number of women administrators or rank institutions by gender equity metrics, but to understand – from the inside – what it is like to seek, hold, and exercise administrative authority as a woman within higher education institutions in Delhi NCR. Such understanding requires sustained, interpretive engagement with individual accounts rather than the kind of aggregated description that survey data affords.

Participant Recruitment and Sample Composition

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit 42 women currently serving in administrative positions across 18 institutions in the Delhi NCR. Recruitment criteria required that participants hold or have recently held a formally designated administrative role: positions included Principal, Vice-Principal, Dean, Registrar, Head of Department, and Administrative Officer. Institutions were selected to

represent variation across three dimensions: governance type (central university, state-funded institution, private university); disciplinary orientation (humanities and social sciences, natural sciences, professional and management education); and institutional standing, ranging from institutions of long-established national reputation to recently established private entities.

The resulting sample encompassed women between the ages of 38 and 67, with administrative experience ranging from two years to over two decades. Fourteen participants identified as belonging to Scheduled Caste or Other Backward Class communities; six participants were from Muslim minority backgrounds. This demographic range was intentional, enabling the intersectional analysis that the theoretical framework demanded.

Data Collection

Primary data collection took the form of semi-structured interviews conducted between September 2024 and February 2026. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in the participant's preferred language – English or Hindi – at a location chosen for participant comfort, typically the participant's institutional office or a mutually agreed neutral setting. With written consent obtained in all cases, interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed by a professional transcription service. The interview protocol covered four broad domains: career history and key decision points; experiences of institutional support and resistance; perceptions of organisational culture; and perspectives on what would meaningfully improve conditions for women administrators. Twelve participants from a cross-section of institutions were subsequently invited to participate in a follow-up focus group, providing an opportunity for collective reflection on preliminary themes.

Secondary data, comprising AISHE reports for 2020–21 through 2022–23, UGC annual reports, and gender audit documents from institutions where these were publicly available, were analysed alongside interview material to situate participant accounts within a broader quantitative frame.

Analytical Approach

Interview and focus group transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the iterative six-phase process described by Braun and Clarke (2006) ^[7]. Analysis moved between close reading of individual transcripts and comparative examination across the dataset, with codes and emerging themes subject to continual revision and interrogation. The analysis was intentionally alert to complexity, divergence, and contradiction within the data: where participant accounts offered competing interpretations of shared experiences, these tensions were preserved rather than resolved through averaging. To strengthen credibility, member checking was conducted with a subset of eight participants, who were invited to review and respond to a summary of the study's emerging findings. A structured peer debriefing process, involving two colleagues external to the research team, provided an additional check on analytical conclusions.

Ethical Protocol

Participation was entirely voluntary, and all participants provided written informed consent before interviews

commenced. All identifying details – names, specific institutional affiliations, and contextual particulars that could enable identification – have been removed or altered throughout this paper. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence, and two participants exercised this right after initial interviews. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Delhi's Institutional Review Board prior to data collection (Reference: IEC/2024/089).

Findings and Discussion

The analysis produced four thematic clusters that together capture the complexity of women's administrative experience in Delhi NCR higher education institutions. These themes are not mutually exclusive; they overlap and reinforce each other in ways the presentation below can only partially convey. Where possible, the argument is anchored in participant voices, which carry a directness and texture that analytical summary cannot fully replicate.

Theme 1: Structural Gatekeeping and the Architecture of Exclusion

Across the range of institutions represented in the sample, participants consistently identified a set of institutional processes that, taken individually, might seem procedurally neutral but together formed a pattern of systematic disadvantage. The most frequently cited of these was the opacity of appointment and promotion procedures. In a striking number of accounts, formal selection processes were described as occurring after informal consensus had already formed among a small group of senior decision-makers, typically male, who networked in spaces to which women were structurally peripheral.

"The committee meeting is, in many ways, a formality," said a Dean at a central university with over 15 years of administrative experience. "The shortlist is prepared by people who have already been talking – in corridors, in the staff club, at functions I am never really part of. By the time I am formally consulted, the contours of the decision have already been drawn. My job, often, is simply to agree."

This dynamic operates through what several participants called 'old boys' networks' – a shorthand for the dense, often caste-and-community-inflected social webs that connect senior male academics to one another and that function as informal but remarkably efficient gatekeeping mechanisms. These networks do not discriminate against women by explicit design; they simply operate in ways that presuppose a certain kind of social life, a certain set of venues and occasions, and a certain comfort with the performance of masculine collegiality that many women neither inhabit nor seek to inhabit.

The timing of institutional advancement also emerged as a structural concern, closely tied to the unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities. Multiple participants described reaching their peak administrative potential precisely during the years when domestic obligations were at their most demanding. Unlike their male peers, few had partners who absorbed the organisational labour of household and family management, and few had found institutional structures that made meaningful accommodation for caregiving alongside professional ambition.

"When I applied for my first Principal position, I was also managing my mother-in-law's illness and two school-going children," one participant recalled. "The selection panel

never said anything directly. But I was asked several times about my 'time availability' and ability to attend evening functions. My male shortlisted colleague was not asked these questions. I did not get the position. He did."

What is notable about these accounts is not their extremity but their ordinariness. Participants did not, for the most part, describe dramatic incidents of overt discrimination. They described an accumulation of small, deniable disadvantages whose cumulative effect over a career was very large indeed.

Theme 2: Gendered Expectations and the Politics of Professional Identity

The structural barriers described in the previous theme do not operate in a social vacuum. They are sustained, and often experienced as natural, because they are undergirded by pervasive cultural assumptions about what women are like, what they want, and what kinds of authority are appropriate for them to hold. These assumptions do not only reside in other people's minds; they are transmitted into the self-perceptions and aspirational horizons of women themselves, in ways that several participants found both recognisable and difficult to fully disentangle.

"I spent several years genuinely not considering applying for leadership roles," said a Registrar at a private university who now oversees a staff of over 80 people. "It was not that anyone told me not to. It was more like – the idea just did not form. I had been conditioned, very subtly, to see ambition as something that did not quite belong to me."

This internalisation of constrained horizons was not uniform across the sample. It was modulated by family background, community norms, and educational experience. Several participants from upper-caste professional families described strong early encouragement for educational achievement but increasing domestic pressure once they reached marriageable age. Participants from Muslim minority communities frequently navigated an additional layer of community scrutiny around the visibility and public presence that administrative leadership required. Dalit and OBC participants – despite the formal protections of reservation policy – described encountering institutional scepticism about their academic credentials that operated independently of, and in addition to, gender-based doubt.

An important dimension of this theme concerned the way administrative competence itself was gendered. Several participants noted that certain qualities – reliability, attention to detail, skill at managing interpersonal difficulties – were readily attributed to women administrators and used to channel them toward particular kinds of roles. Other qualities – strategic vision, institutional boldness, the authority to set direction rather than implement it – were tacitly associated with male leadership, creating a persistent ceiling on the scope of authority women were seen as naturally suited to exercise.

"I am very good at running things efficiently," said one Dean. "People appreciate that. What they find harder to accept is when I tell them where things should go. When I set strategy. That is when I feel the resistance – not hostility, exactly, but a kind of surprise. As though vision were not something women were expected to offer."

Theme 3: The Double Bind of Visibility

One of the analytically richest themes to emerge from the data concerns the complicated and often paradoxical

relationship between visibility and institutional recognition. Women administrators in this study occupied a peculiar position: they were, in certain respects, highly visible within their institutions – their gender made them conspicuous in rooms where most occupants were male, they were frequently called upon to represent the institution in ceremonial and public-facing capacities, and their personal conduct was subject to a level of informal scrutiny that their male peers rarely reported. Yet in the specific sense that matters most for career progression – visibility as a serious contender for institutional influence and strategic authority – many felt thoroughly unseen.

This double bind resonates with earlier scholarship on the experience of token figures in homogeneous groups (Kanter, 1977) ^[11], but participants' accounts gave it a specifically Indian institutional texture. The experience of having an idea or proposal ignored in a committee meeting, only to hear it endorsed when reiterated by a male colleague, was reported by more than half the sample with a weary specificity that suggested both familiarity and ongoing frustration.

"I genuinely stopped counting after a while," said one Principal. "I would speak, the room would move on, and then ten minutes later a male colleague would say almost the same thing and people would respond as though it were a fresh insight. What do you do with that? If you object, you seem petty. If you don't, the pattern continues. There is no clean answer."

The ceremonial visibility of women administrators had its own ambivalences. Being asked to speak at women's day events, to serve on student grievance committees, to represent the institution at cultural programmes – these roles afforded some participants a public presence they valued. But they also, several noted, absorbed time and energy that could otherwise have supported the research and strategic activities through which institutional influence is actually accumulated. Being prominently involved in the softer, relational dimensions of administration, while rewarding in human terms, consistently left women with thinner credentials in the registers that promotional assessments privileged.

Theme 4: Navigation, Resistance, and the Making of Leadership

The picture described in the preceding three themes is one of considerable institutional difficulty. But it would be both analytically incomplete and politically irresponsible to leave it there. The women in this study were not passive sufferers of institutional disadvantage; they were active agents who thought carefully and sometimes creatively about how to build and exercise authority in conditions that were not arranged in their favour. This theme documents their strategies.

The most commonly described approach involved the deliberate cultivation of supportive relationships across hierarchical and gender lines. Many participants had identified, early in their careers, male colleagues who were not merely non-hostile but actively sympathetic to the project of gender-equitable administration. These allies were carefully cultivated – not as patrons but as collaborators whose institutional capital could complement and amplify women's own professional efforts.

"I am very intentional about who I invest my energy in," said a Dean who had recently led a significant curriculum

reform process. "There are people who will hear me, who will credit me, who will argue for my ideas when I am not in the room. Building those relationships is not a compromise – it is a strategy. I understand the system I am in, and I work within it intelligently."

Mentorship – both its receipt and its provision – emerged as one of the most emotionally significant themes in the dataset. Participants who had benefited from the sustained professional guidance of a more senior woman consistently described it not only as practically useful but as psychologically enabling: the experience of being believed in by someone who had navigated similar terrain, and survived, produced a sense of possibility that was qualitatively different from mere information or advice.

"Before I had a mentor, I knew intellectually that women could lead institutions," one Registrar said. "But knowing it intellectually and feeling it as a real possibility for yourself – those are different things. My mentor gave me the second. She showed me, by existing, that it was actually possible."

Many of these women now extended the same commitment to junior colleagues. The ethic of active mentoring was described variously as professional duty, personal gratitude, and long-term investment in institutional change – a form of structural intervention that individuals could undertake without waiting for governing bodies to act.

Equally significant was what participants described as a form of strategic professionalism: a deliberate and disciplined investment in formal credentials, institutional knowledge, and the documentation of one's own contributions. Several participants explained that they maintained meticulous records of decisions made, projects led, and outcomes achieved – not out of natural bureaucratic inclination but out of a clear-eyed recognition that their professional credibility was more vulnerable to challenge than their male colleagues' and that the evidence for their competence therefore needed to be more explicitly assembled.

"I prepare for every meeting three times more than anyone else in the room," said one Head of Department. "That is not anxiety – it is tactical. I have learned that being underprepared costs me more than it costs my male colleagues. My margin for appearing uncertain is narrower. So, I eliminate the uncertainty."

Recommendations

The patterns documented in this study do not arise from individual failures of courage or competence; they are produced by institutional arrangements that have, often invisibly, encoded certain assumptions about who leads and how. Transforming them therefore requires action at the institutional, regulatory, and cultural levels simultaneously. The following recommendations are directed at three distinct constituencies.

For Regulatory Bodies and Governing Authorities

The University Grants Commission should incorporate binding gender equity benchmarks into the accreditation and funding frameworks it administers, requiring institutions to report publicly on the gender composition of their administrative structures at all levels, including selection committees and governing councils. Without visibility, accountability is impossible, and without accountability, the current incentive structure – which creates no cost for institutional inaction – will not change. The National

Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) should similarly integrate gender governance criteria into its institutional assessment rubrics, giving weight not only to stated policies but to demonstrated outcomes.

For Institutional Leadership and Human Resources

Universities and colleges should design and resource formal mentorship infrastructure for women pursuing or holding administrative roles – not as an optional addition to the institutional calendar but as a core element of professional development, with dedicated time, funding, and coordination. Appointment and promotion criteria should be reviewed for gendered bias, with particular attention to the systematic undervaluing of administrative service and pastoral work that disproportionately falls to women faculty. Institutions should establish formal policies on flexible working, caregiver leave, and career re-entry that are clearly communicated, consistently applied, and free of the informal stigma that currently discourages many eligible women from accessing them. Mandatory gender-sensitivity training for all those who serve on appointment committees would address the unconscious assumptions that informal processes routinely activate.

For Academic Associations and Civil Society

Professional bodies in Indian higher education should create dedicated leadership development programmes for women academics, combining skill-building with access to the peer networks from which informal institutional knowledge flows. Research funding councils should treat gender equity in academic administration as a priority research area, supporting the generation of granular, longitudinal evidence that policymakers currently lack. Women-led academic networks, which have begun to emerge with encouraging energy across Delhi NCR in recent years, deserve institutional recognition and modest but consistent resource support: they represent some of the most effective grassroots infrastructure for sustained cultural change that currently exists.

Conclusion

This paper set out to understand why the Delhi NCR – a region of high educational attainment, institutional density, and formal policy commitment to gender equality – nonetheless produces and sustains such a pronounced disparity between women's presence in higher education as students and their authority within it as administrators. The accounts of 42 women who live and work within this disparity every day have yielded a nuanced and, in important respects, uncomfortable answer.

The barriers are not primarily in the form of explicit exclusion. They live instead in procedural opacity, in the social geographies of informal networks, in the accumulated weight of cultural expectations about what kinds of people lead, and in institutional timelines that were never designed with women's lives in mind. They are also, crucially, intersectional: the experience of a Dalit woman seeking a Deanship is not simply the experience of a woman with an added layer of difficulty – it is a qualitatively distinct experience shaped by the particular ways in which caste and gender interact within specific institutional fields.

But this paper has also documented something else: the remarkable ingenuity, persistence, and generosity that many women administrators bring to their work despite the

conditions they navigate. They build coalitions, mentor successors, document their contributions fastidiously, and create, within hostile conditions, genuine institutional change. Their efforts deserve not only acknowledgement but institutional support that would make their resilience less necessary and their impact more structurally secure.

The argument of this paper, stated plainly, is this: genuine equity in higher education administration is not achieved by finding exceptional women willing to push through exceptional obstacles. It is achieved by redesigning institutions so that the obstacles themselves are dismantled. That redesign – of appointment processes, mentorship cultures, caregiving policies, and the tacit assumptions embedded in every informal interaction – is within the reach of every institution in Delhi NCR. What is required is the institutional will to pursue it, and the intellectual honesty to recognise that the costs of continued inaction are borne not by institutions but by the women they have not yet learned to welcome as leaders.

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