JOURNAL OF RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES IN MULTIDISCIPLINARY SCIENCE, EDUCATION AND TECHNOLOGY (RPSET)
VOL: 1, ISSUE 4, OCTOBER – DECEMBER 2026
RCHUB PUBLISHER
ISSN: 3139-3934
DOI: https://doi.org/10.65725/RPSET/1/4/006

HUMAN RIGHTS AWARENESS AMONG POSTGRADUATE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN PUNJAB AND CHANDIGARH IN RELATION TO GENDER AND LOCALE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines human rights awareness among postgraduate university students in Punjab and Chandigarh in relation to gender and locale. The investigation draws on a descriptive survey of students from three universities in Punjab and Chandigarh and uses a standardised human rights awareness instrument. Group differences were examined using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. The findings indicate that male and female students did not differ significantly in their human rights awareness, whereas a statistically significant difference emerged between rural and urban students, with urban students demonstrating higher awareness. The discussion considers these findings in relation to previous studies of human rights education and demographic differences in awareness. It highlights the importance of inclusive educational opportunities that support awareness of rights among university students from different residential backgrounds. The study is limited to the participating universities and the comparisons reported here. The article concludes that gender and locale should not be treated as interchangeable dimensions of difference when planning or evaluating human rights education in higher education.

Keywords: human rights awareness; university students; gender; rural–urban differences; Punjab; higher education

INTRODUCTION

HUMAN RIGHTS AWARENESS AS AN EDUCATIONAL CONCERN

Human rights awareness has a specific educational meaning in this study. It is not treated merely as approval of an abstract ideal; the instrument used in the investigation distinguishes knowledge of human rights documents, knowledge and understanding of human rights

concepts, and recognition of situations involving violations or non-violations. These domains connect formal knowledge with the capacity to identify the practical meaning of rights in social situations. Consequently, the study is concerned with a measured awareness score, not with a direct observation of students' conduct or their willingness to defend the rights of others. Keeping these distinctions visible is important when interpreting group differences.

The study situates human rights in a wider account of dignity, freedom, equality and constitutional protection. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) is an international reference point, while the Constitution of India provides a national legal and civic setting. For university students, these frameworks are relevant both as subjects of learning and as principles implicated in academic and public life. Awareness of a right, however, should not be equated automatically with effective access to that right. An individual may correctly identify a principle without possessing the resources, confidence or institutional opportunity to act upon it. The present study measures the former more directly than the latter.

The emphasis on postgraduate students also matters. Participants were studying in different university environments and in academic and professional streams. They had already passed through several stages of formal education, yet their exposure to civic information and everyday social experiences may have differed. The research questions therefore ask whether the observed scores vary by gender and by rural or urban background. These comparisons describe associations in the sampled population; they do not identify the causes of any difference.

Gender and locale should be interpreted as grouping variables rather than explanations in themselves. The terms male and female identify the two categories used in the analysis. Rural and urban identify the residence-background categories used in the reported analysis. Neither category directly measures curricular exposure, parental education, digital access, legal literacy or participation in rights-related activities. Such mechanisms may be plausible subjects for future inquiry, but they were not independently established by the two comparisons reported here. This distinction helps prevent the interpretation from extending beyond the evidence.

Human rights awareness concerns individuals' knowledge and understanding of basic rights, freedoms and situations involving the protection or violation of these rights. The study situates awareness within education for dignity, equality, non-discrimination and responsible citizenship. It also presents higher education institutions as important settings in which

students may encounter constitutional values, human rights concepts and opportunities for civic participation.

A focus on university students is relevant because postgraduate students participate in academic and social environments in which questions of equality, freedom of expression, participation and access to opportunities arise. Understanding whether human rights awareness differs across demographic groups may help identify where awareness-building initiatives should be more inclusive. The present article isolates two comparisons: gender (male versus female) and locale (rural versus urban). It does not analyse socio-economic status, social adjustment, emotional maturity or stream of study.

The study addresses two questions: (1) Do male and female postgraduate university students differ significantly in their human rights awareness scores? (2) Do rural and urban postgraduate university students differ significantly in their human rights awareness scores? The corresponding null hypotheses propose no statistically significant mean differences by gender or locale.

The study defines human rights awareness as familiarity with fundamental rights and the ability to distinguish situations that involve human rights violations or non-violations. It relates human rights education to the development of knowledge, values and conduct that support the dignity and rights of others. In this account, educational institutions can contribute not only by transmitting information about rights but also by creating environments in which respect, equality and participation are practised.

The present paper focuses only on the two comparisons concerning human rights awareness: gender and locale. It does not report results for the other variables or for academic and professional streams examined in the wider study. The purpose is to present the relevant findings alongside a review of related studies that can help interpret both similarities and differences across educational contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

These higher-education studies are relevant for different reasons. Padmavathy and Pallai (2015) examined university students and therefore address a population closer to the present investigation than studies of school pupils. Singh and Singh (2015), by contrast, focused on B.Ed. students in Punjab. Their findings illuminate teacher-education contexts, which are institutionally and professionally distinctive. Selvam (2018) considered human rights

education among postgraduate students, making educational exposure a salient theme even though the study design and questions should not be treated as identical to the present survey.

Saikia and Padmavathy (2022) offer another higher-education comparison because their study considered residence alongside educational level, stream and age. The thesis reports higher awareness among rural than urban participants in that particular sample. This direction is not the same as the present Punjab result. The contrast is informative: a rural–urban label does not predict one uniform result across institutions or regions. Differences in recruitment, institutional composition, course exposure and social setting may matter, but the available summaries do not permit a causal test of those possibilities.

Sonish (2025), examined undergraduate students and reported a moderate overall level of awareness. An overall average is a different analytical question from whether two demographic groups differ. A sample may show moderate awareness while also containing statistically detectable differences between subgroups, or it may show a wide spread of scores without a significant gender difference. The present article therefore treats descriptions of awareness levels and comparisons of group means as related but distinct contributions.

Taken as a set, these studies justify the attention given to higher education while showing why the current analysis should retain its precise population description. Postgraduate students from three named universities cannot automatically represent every undergraduate, teacher trainee, university teacher or young adult in Punjab. The review offers context for the observed results rather than a basis for generalising beyond the original sampling frame.

Padmavathy and Pallai (2015) examined human rights awareness among 200 postgraduate students selected using stratified random sampling. The study employed means, standard deviations and t-tests, and reported an average level of awareness across the overall sample and the groups defined by gender, residence, stream or faculty, and family type.

Singh and Singh (2015) studied 100 B.Ed. students in Fatehgarh Sahib District, Punjab. The study found that none of the participants fell in the low-awareness category and emphasises the need to strengthen human rights awareness among students.

Selvam (2018) studied the effects of human rights education among 97 postgraduate students identified through convenience sampling. The study focused on human rights education in postgraduate settings.

Saikia and Padmavathy (2022) examined 200 students of Tezpur University, Assam, selected through simple random sampling. The thesis reports higher human rights awareness

ISSN: 3139-3934
DOI: https://doi.org/10.65725/RPSET/1/4/006

among rural than urban students and higher awareness among postgraduate than undergraduate students. This rural–urban pattern differs from the present study and illustrates the importance of interpreting findings within their particular samples.

Sonish (2025) studied 150 undergraduate students at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, using convenience sampling. The study found moderate overall awareness, higher awareness among male students, and no significant rural–urban difference. The study therefore presents a different combination of gender and locale findings from the present sample.

The gender-related evidence in Chapter II is mixed. Agarwal (2014) studied adults in Agra rather than university students and reported a significant gender difference. Oommen (2018) studied teacher trainees and found no significant male–female difference. Fatema (2019), working with B.Ed. students in Aurangabad, also reported no significant gender difference. Borah et al. (2022) found no significant gender difference among undergraduates in Assam. The agreement between some findings and the present result should not obscure differences in age, educational stage, and location and selection procedures.

A non-significant test does not establish that two groups are identical. In the Punjab thesis, male and female students had slightly different means, but the reported test did not support rejecting the null hypothesis at the stated significance threshold. The correct conclusion is that the observed difference was not statistically significant in this sample and analysis. It would be stronger than the evidence permits to claim that gender never affects human rights awareness or that the two populations have precisely the same level of awareness.

Likewise, a significant gender difference in another study need not contradict the present result in a strict logical sense. Research samples differ, measures may not be the same, and social and educational settings are not interchangeable. A responsible synthesis recognises that the thesis contains both significant and non-significant gender findings in prior work. The present study adds a further observation from postgraduate students at three universities rather than resolving every disagreement in the wider literature.

The binary categories used in the source study also limit interpretation. The thesis reports comparisons for male and female students only. It does not report separate data for other gender identities, nor does the present article attempt to infer them. Moreover, a difference in the mean score, whether significant or not, does not reveal which rights concepts were

understood or misunderstood by each group. Dimension-level analyses would be needed to make that more specific claim.

Agarwal (2014) compared human rights awareness among 80 adults in Agra city, including 40 male and 40 female respondents aged 25–45. The thesis reports a significant gender difference; the adult community sample, however, is distinct from the postgraduate student population examined here.

Oommen (2018) investigated 300 teacher trainees and found no significant difference between male and female trainees in human rights awareness. The reported finding is consistent with the non-significant gender comparison in the present study, although the populations differ.

Fatema (2019) studied 150 B.Ed. students in Aurangabad, including 75 male and 75 female participants selected randomly. The thesis reports average awareness and no statistically significant gender difference.

Borah et al. (2022) studied 250 undergraduates at Tihu College, Assam, selected through simple random sampling. They found a significant difference by locale and no significant gender difference.

Kaur (2026) studied 200 Class XI students in Amritsar, including 100 male and 100 female students. The thesis reports a small female advantage in mean awareness that was not statistically significant, indicating that observed mean differences need not imply significant group differences.

Locale appears prominently in the thesis review because prior investigations have not reached one consistent conclusion. Jadav (2016) examined women affected by domestic violence in rural and urban Gujarat, a population whose experiences are not directly comparable with those of postgraduate students. Jaidka (2016) considered high-school students in Moga district and reported a small urban advantage. Yadav and Roymahapatra (2019) studied B.Ed. trainees and reported a significant locality-related difference among urban and rural boys. Borah et al. (2022) reported an urban advantage in their undergraduate sample.

The review also contains an important counterexample: Saikia and Padmavathy (2022) reported higher awareness among rural students at Tezpur University. This makes it inappropriate to describe urban superiority as a universal pattern. The Punjab findings should instead be described precisely: within the reported sample, the urban mean exceeded the rural

mean, and the reported t-ratio met the thesis criterion for significance. The analysis did not test the factors behind this difference.

Rural and urban categories can conceal considerable variation. Students living in either setting may attend the same university, encounter similar curricula and differ in earlier schooling or access to information. The categories do not indicate how long a participant lived in a particular setting, whether the student migrated for study, or what human rights instruction was previously received. Consequently, the result is best read as a group-level association under the definitions used in the thesis.

An educational interpretation can still be useful if carefully framed. The result suggests that universities may wish to examine whether students from different residence backgrounds have comparable opportunities to learn about rights and to discuss concrete rights-related situations. Such an implication does not prove that any existing university programme is inadequate. It points to a question for institutional assessment and future research, grounded in the measured difference rather than an asserted cause.

Jadav (2016) compared 180 rural and 180 urban women affected by domestic violence in North and Central Gujarat. The thesis reports significantly higher awareness among the urban group. This supports the relevance of locality but cannot be generalised directly to university students.

Jaidka (2016) examined 100 Class X students in rural and urban high schools in Moga district. Jaidka reported that urban students were slightly more aware of human rights than rural students, and male students slightly more aware than female students.

Yadav and Roymahapatra (2019) examined 200 B.Ed. trainees with respect to locality and gender. The authors reported a significant difference in awareness between urban and rural male trainees, showing the value of considering locality within demographic groups.

Borah et al. (2022) reported significantly higher human rights awareness among urban than rural undergraduates in their Assam sample, a direction consistent with the present locale comparison.

Saikia and Padmavathy (2022) reported the reverse direction—higher awareness among rural students—in their Tezpur University sample. Taken together, these findings do not support treating urban advantage as universal.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To compare the human rights awareness of male and female postgraduate university students in Punjab and Chandigarh.
2. To compare the human rights awareness of rural and urban postgraduate university students in Punjab and Chandigarh.

HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

1. There is no significant difference in human rights awareness between male and female postgraduate university students in Punjab and Chandigarh.
2. There is no significant difference in human rights awareness between rural and urban postgraduate university students in Punjab and Chandigarh.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a descriptive survey method. The research population comprised postgraduate students enrolled in academic and professional courses at three universities: Punjabi University, Patiala; Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar; and Panjab University, Chandigarh. The design was observational and cross-sectional; the comparisons therefore describe associations with group membership rather than causal effects of gender or locale.

SAMPLE

The sample comprised 600 postgraduate students, including 315 in academic streams and 285 in professional streams. The gender comparison included 300 male and 300 female students. The locale comparison included 290 rural and 310 urban students.

TOOL EMPLOYED

Human rights awareness was assessed using the Human Rights Awareness Test (HRAT) developed by Vishal Sood and Arati Anand (2012). The test contains 50 items across three dimensions: knowledge of human rights documents; knowledge and understanding of human rights concepts and principles; and understanding of situations involving human rights violations or non-violations. Responses are True, Undecided or False. Positive items receive scores of 2, 1 and 0 respectively, while negative items are reverse-scored. Total scores range from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating greater awareness.

The thesis reports a test–retest reliability coefficient of .67 and a Spearman–Brown corrected split-half reliability coefficient of .731 for the published instrument. These are instrument properties reported in the thesis, not reliability estimates recalculated for the present 600-person sample.

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The investigator obtained departmental permission, explained the purpose of the study, assured respondents of confidentiality and voluntary participation, administered the research instruments and checked the returned questionnaires.

Group means, standard deviations and independent-group t-values were taken from Tables 4.5 and 4.6 of Chapter IV of the thesis. The reported significance threshold was .01.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

GENDER-WISE COMPARISON

Table 1. Human rights awareness of male and female postgraduate university students

Group	No.	Mean	S.D.	Calculated t-value	Significance
Male	300	62.03	13.27	0.922	Not significant
Female	300	61.03	13.19		

The mean score for male students was 62.03 (SD = 13.27), compared with 61.03 (SD = 13.19) for female students. The reported t-value of 0.922 was not statistically significant. Accordingly, the study did not find sufficient evidence of a gender difference in human rights awareness scores among the sampled postgraduate students. The one-point mean difference should not be interpreted as evidence of a meaningful gender advantage.

Interpretation. The male mean exceeds the female mean by 1.00 point. The reported t-ratio is not significant, so the first null hypothesis is not rejected. This finding is compatible with the non-significant gender comparisons reported by Oommen (2018), Fatema (2019), and Borah et al. (2022), but contrasts with the significant gender difference reported in Agarwal (2014). These studies used different populations and should not be treated as replications of an identical design.

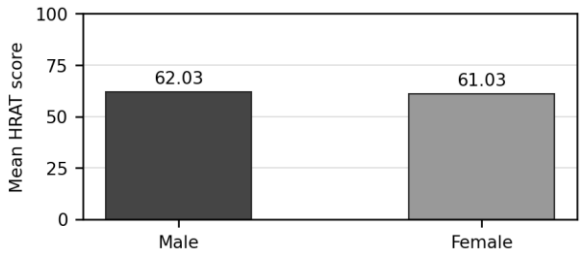

Figure 1. Mean human rights awareness scores by gender

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ISSN: 3139-3934
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LOCALE-WISE COMPARISON

READING THE TWO COMPARISONS TOGETHER

The two comparisons answer different questions. Gender produces a mean difference of 1.00 point, with a non-significant reported t-ratio. Locale produces a mean difference of 5.49 points, with a reported t-ratio of 5.20 and significance at the .01 level. It is reasonable to say that the observed locale difference is larger than the observed gender difference on the same 0–100 scale. However, the two tests do not by themselves establish that locale is a stronger causal determinant than gender.

It is also important not to treat the mean scores as percentages of students who understand their rights. The score is a sum of item responses and can be expressed on a 0–100 range, but it is not a direct percentage of respondents who possess a specified legal competence. Similarly, the group mean does not show the number of students who answered each statement correctly. Item-level information would be required for an analysis of misconceptions or specific learning needs.

The standard deviations show that there is considerable variation within each group. For the gender comparison, both standard deviations are approximately thirteen points; for locale, the reported standard deviations are 11.99 for rural and 13.80 for urban students. These dispersions caution against treating every member of a category as having the same awareness level. The statistical conclusion concerns differences between aggregate group means, not the awareness of an individual student.

Because the source provides separate two-group comparisons, it does not show whether the locale pattern differs within male and female subgroups or whether any apparent association remains after accounting for university, stream or other characteristics. Such questions would require cross-tabulated data or multivariable analysis. They are beyond the evidence presented in this article and should not be inferred from the two reported t-tests.

Table 2. Human rights awareness of rural and urban postgraduate university students

Group	No.	Mean	S.D.	Calculated t-value	Significance
Rural	290	58.69	11.99	5.20	$p < .01$
Urban	310	64.18	13.80		

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ISSN: 3139-3934
DOI: https://doi.org/10.65725/RPSET/1/4/006

Rural-background students obtained a mean human rights awareness score of 58.69 (SD = 11.99), whereas urban-background students obtained a mean of 64.18 (SD = 13.80). The reported t-value of 5.20 was significant at the .01 level. The observed difference favoured urban-background students, with a mean gap of 5.49 points on the 0–100 test scale. This result describes the sample and does not establish that rural residence itself caused lower awareness.

Interpretation. Urban students scored 5.49 points higher on average than rural students. The thesis reports this difference as significant at the .01 level; consequently, the second null hypothesis is rejected. This direction resembles the urban advantage reported by Jadav (2016) and Borah et al. (2022), but differs from the rural advantage reported by Saikia and Padmavathy (2022). The evidence indicates a difference within the present sample; it does not establish why the difference occurred.

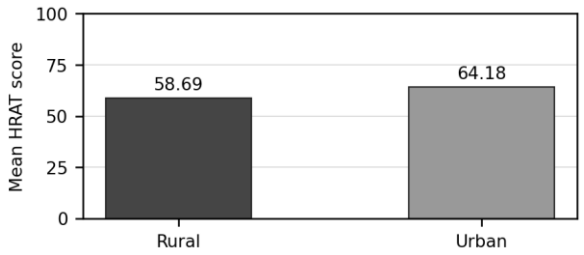

Figure 2. Mean human rights awareness scores by locale

MAJOR FINDINGS

1. The gender comparison was not statistically significant: male students (M = 62.03, SD = 13.27) and female students (M = 61.03, SD = 13.19), reported t = 0.922.
2. The locale comparison was statistically significant: urban students (M = 64.18, SD = 13.80) scored higher than rural students (M = 58.69, SD = 11.99), reported t = 5.20, p < .01.

DISCUSSION

EDUCATIONAL INTERPRETATION AND COMPARISON WITH PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The gender result is consistent with the non-significant differences described for teacher trainees by Oommen (2018) and Fatema (2019), and for undergraduates by Borah et al. (2022). This correspondence supports the interpretation that a large gender separation is not

ISSN: 3139-3934
DOI: https://doi.org/10.65725/RPSET/1/4/006

inevitable in educational samples. Yet the evidence is not uniform: the thesis also reports studies in which gender-related differences were observed. The current result should therefore be presented as one context-specific finding rather than a definitive statement about male and female students generally.

The locale result is consistent in direction with the urban advantage reported by Jaidka (2016) and Borah et al. (2022). It is not consistent in direction with Saikia and Padmavathy (2022), who reported higher awareness among rural university students in their setting. This contrast is a substantive finding of the narrative synthesis. It suggests that residence categories interact with local educational and social circumstances in ways that a simple rural–urban label cannot fully capture. The present survey did not test such interactions, so the interpretation remains cautious.

One implication for higher education is that rights education should not be planned solely on the assumption that all postgraduate students have the same baseline knowledge. A university interested in strengthening human rights education could assess understanding of documents, concepts and real-life scenarios separately, because these are the three dimensions of the instrument used in the source study. Such assessment could help identify areas where explanation or discussion is needed without making unsupported assumptions about particular demographic groups.

Another implication concerns pedagogy. Human rights learning involves more than memorising names of documents. The instrument itself includes situations that students must classify as violations or non-violations, which creates a rationale for discussing practical examples alongside formal concepts. Classroom dialogue, case-based reflection and access to reliable civic information are possible educational approaches, but this study did not evaluate an intervention. Their mention here is an implication for consideration, not an empirical result of the Punjab survey.

The findings should also be interpreted with care in public discussion. The non-significant gender difference is not a basis for dismissing gender-specific barriers in society, because the measured outcome is a particular awareness score. The significant locale difference is not a basis for stereotyping rural students, because the distributions overlap and many individuals may depart from their group average. Educational responses should be inclusive and based on assessed needs rather than fixed expectations about identity or residence.

ISSN: 3139-3934
DOI: https://doi.org/10.65725/RPSET/1/4/006

The findings distinguish between two demographic comparisons. First, the absence of a statistically significant gender difference suggests that male and female respondents in these three universities had broadly similar measured awareness. This result does not imply that all students possess adequate awareness or that their experiences of rights and discrimination are identical; the test measures awareness rather than lived experiences.

Second, the significant rural–urban difference suggests an inequality in measured awareness within the sampled postgraduate population. The source study does not establish the mechanisms underlying this difference. Explanations involving differences in schooling, access to information, institutional exposure or other resources would require separate evidence and should be treated as hypotheses for future research rather than as findings of this study.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

For higher education institutions, the result supports examining whether human rights information and learning opportunities are accessible to students from different geographical backgrounds. Activities such as orientation programmes, legal literacy sessions and inclusive campus discussions may be considered, but their effectiveness cannot be inferred from the present survey. The findings provide a rationale for testing such initiatives in future research.

The review of related literature indicates that demographic patterns are context-dependent. In the present postgraduate sample, gender is not associated with a statistically detectable difference in mean awareness, whereas rural–urban locale is. The existence of mixed findings in earlier studies makes it especially important not to interpret the locale effect as a universal property of all rural or urban students. Differences in sampling, educational level, instruments and study setting may be relevant, but the current summary statistics cannot isolate their effects.

LIMITATIONS

DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

The first limitation is the descriptive survey design. It captures differences in scores at the time of measurement but does not demonstrate how those differences arose. The second is the use of a single awareness instrument. Although the thesis reports reliability information for the published test, a total-score measure cannot fully describe students' experiences of rights, their everyday decisions or their ability to obtain remedies when rights are violated.

ISSN: 3139-3934
DOI: https://doi.org/10.65725/RPSET/1/4/006

The third limitation concerns the scope of the sample. Participants were postgraduate students from three universities, which limits how broadly the findings can be generalised.

The analysis used group-level summary statistics. Participant-level data would be needed to assess score distributions, examine test assumptions and estimate differences adjusted for university or academic stream.

Future work could investigate the three dimensions of the awareness test separately, use interviews to explore how students interpret concrete rights situations, and compare educational opportunities across residence backgrounds. Longitudinal or intervention designs could examine whether specific instructional approaches improve awareness. These are proposed directions only; no such additional data are reported in the present article.

CONCLUSIONS

Among 600 postgraduate students from three universities, the study found no statistically significant difference in human rights awareness by gender, but a statistically significant difference by locale, with urban-background students scoring higher than rural-background students. These findings suggest that attention to geographical background may be useful when planning equitable human rights education in higher education. Further research should examine the factors associated with this difference and evaluate interventions using stronger comparative or longitudinal designs.

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