Societal Perspectives on the Challenges Faced By Women Students of Sikkim in Higher Education

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
Research Paper	This paper aims to shed light on the societal hurdles encountered by women pursuing higher education in Sikkim, the 22nd state of India. According to the 2011 census report, the literacy rate in Sikkim is 76.43 percent for females and 87.30 percent for males, revealing a gender disparity with male literacy at 87.2 percent. Despite this, Sikkim outperforms many mainstream Indian states in terms of women's status, supported by various local studies. While Sikkimese women exhibit positive representation in both public and private employment, the pervasive patriarchal system persists in every Sikkimese family. This qualitative study, approached through a feminist lens, employs an unstructured interview schedule to explore the challenges faced by 20 women students of Sikkim enrolled in undergraduate, postgraduate, and research programs, both within and outside the state. Through in-depth data collection, the research scrutinizes diverse social factors impeding women's educational progression in Sikkim. These factors encompass patriarchal norms, economic constraints, language barriers, geographic challenges, as well as instances of sexism, prejudice, and discrimination. The study aims to comprehensively understand and address the multifaceted issues hindering women's pursuit of higher education in the region.
Keywords : *Women students, societal challenges, Higher education, Sikkim, patriarchy*	

Introduction

Women who pursue education not only acquire essential skills and knowledge but also become catalysts for positive societal change by actively contributing to various aspects of community development. Recognizing the indispensable role of educated women, Agrawal and Agrawal (1994) emphasize the need to extend educational opportunities to women, as their education significantly influences the succeeding generation. Education serves as a catalyst for positive transitions, equipping individuals with cognitive competencies, marketable skills, social capital, and values crucial for various adult roles (Lloyd, 2005). Sarma (1991) underscores the transformative power of education and knowledge, enabling women to reason and combat social injustices while empowering them to earn a livelihood and make informed decisions.

Stiglitz (1998, 2003) asserts the pivotal role of education in economic development, considering knowledge acquisition as a key determinant of growth. With women constituting nearly half of the population, their education becomes instrumental in societal and economic development (Dandapat, 2013). Better-educated women, as revealed by Rahman and Rao's (2004) study, wield greater autonomy, manifested through increased mobility and influence in household resource allocation. Access to higher education for women is contingent on their past performances, subject to societal criteria and policies like The Right to Education Act, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, and Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana, introduced by the government to promote women's education. Despite strides in women's education trends in India, challenges persist, particularly in accessing quality education and pursuing professional and technical fields, reflecting enduring gender disparities and rural-urban differentials (Jyothirmayi, 2021; Dandapat, 2013). Gender inequalities within families further compound these challenges, emphasizing the need for continued efforts to address access, equity, and quality concerns in higher education.

Status of Women in Higher education of Sikkim

Sikkim, the 22nd state in the Indian Union, boasts a diverse landscape featuring snowcapped mountains, tropical jungles, and alpine valleys at its foothills. Positioned as the westernmost part of the eastern Himalayan realm, it spans the Great and Inner Himalayan regions, measuring approximately 40 miles in width and 80 to 90 miles in length. Enclosed between the Singhalia ridges and the Donkhya range, Sikkim shares borders with Nepal to the west, Tibet to the north, Bhutan to the east, and West Bengal to the south. Geographically, it is situated between 28 degrees 07' 48" and 27 degrees 04' 46" north latitude

and 88 degrees 00' 58" and 88 degrees 55' 25" east longitude, covering an area of 7,300 square kilometers (Bhutia, 2005).

In Sikkim, women make up nearly 47 percent of the total population, and their social standing is comparatively better than in other regions of the country. However, disparities persist among communities and castes, reflecting the patriarchal nature of Sikkimese society, where paternal property inheritance prevails. Women's experiences and priorities vary globally, but in Sikkim, there is a positive trend in literacy rates, with 76.43 percent for females and 87.30 percent for males (DESME, 2006). While the gender gap in literacy is narrowing, women remain underrepresented in higher education, particularly in teaching roles, where female faculty members are slightly fewer than their male counterparts (Thapa, 2014). Despite improvements, there are evident gender disparities in enrollment across disciplines, with lower participation of female students in polytechnic and science colleges compared to males (Bhutia & Pradhan, 2022). Despite discussions about progress, women in higher education in Sikkim continue to constitute a small minority (Thapa, 2014).

Higher education in Sikkim faced a delayed onset, with the absence of a university creating obstacles for students until the establishment of Sikkim University in 2007 (Bhutia & Pradhan, 2023). Prior to this milestone, Sikkim's colleges were affiliated with North Bengal University, featuring limited and rigid curriculum options. Sikkim University not only provided academic resources but also fulfilled students' aspirations for higher education. Subsequently, the state witnessed a surge in educational institutions, including new private ones offering diverse courses.

The enrollment in higher education has shown a consistent increase, marked by annual admission rushes. Notably, gender parity is observed in general colleges, with some courses having a higher representation of women, often considered as feminine disciplines (Bhutia & Pradhan, 2022; Thapa, 2014). However, disparities persist in professional and technical courses, which are generally more expensive, leading to lower participation by women. The skewed enrollment in science and polytechnic colleges reflects societal biases about women's aptitude for mathematics and science (Bhutia & Pradhan, 2022). Despite an overall positive educational scenario, regional and gender disparities persist in Sikkim (Chhetri, 2014).

Theoretical background- Postmodern Feminism

The study relies on postmodern feminism to explore the societal perspectives on the challenges faced by women students of Sikkim in Higher Education. Feminist theories encompass a range of perspectives aimed at comprehending and challenging gender inequality systems. There are strands of thought each, with its own approach. Liberal feminism advocates for reforms while radical feminism seeks the overthrow of patriarchal structures. These theories address issues like sexuality, reproductive rights and the intersectionality of race and class. Key works in theory include Betty Friedans "The Feminine Mystique" (1963) for Liberal Feminism Kate Milletts "Sexual Politics" (1970) for Radical Feminism and Bell Hooks "Ain't I a Woman?" (1981) for Black Feminism. Marxist feminists such as Shulamith Firestone analyze the relationship between capitalism and gender oppression in works like "The Dialectic of Sex" (1970). Other influential works include Chandra Talpade Mohantys "Under Eyes; Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1988) for feminism, Judith Butlers "Gender Trouble" (1990) for queer feminism and Hélène Cixous and Catherine Cléments "The Newly Born Woman" (1986), for postmodern feminism. Each theory contributes to an understanding of the nature surrounding gender issues and strives towards creating a more just society.

"Too many women in too many countries speak the same language, of silence"- This poem was written by Anasuya Sengupta which Mrs. Hillary Clinton incorporated the poem in her speech on the importance of womens' economic, political and social participation in every country. The diversity of women's struggles around the world constitutes a challenge to claim that feminism is a western invention. All over the world women are occupied in struggles for more humane and just societies through action on 'women issues', which takes various forms and adopts various cultural expressions (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Feminism does not exist if there is no common ground of interests in regard to gender biasness.

The quote, "Too many women in too many countries speak the same language, of silence," by Anasuya Sengupta, takes center stage in highlighting the pervasive issue of women's silence, suggesting a shared experience across diverse nations. This powerful statement was not only recognized by Mrs. Hillary Clinton but also integrated into her speech, emphasizing the global significance of addressing women's economic, political, and social participation in every country. The inclusion of this poem in a speech advocating for women's engagement underscores the universality of the challenges faced by women worldwide. By doing so, it challenges the notion that feminism is a Western construct, asserting that the struggles and aspirations of women are shared across cultural and geographical boundaries. The reference to the diversity of women's struggles serves as a crucial element in debunking the claim that

feminism is exclusive to the Western world. The acknowledgment that women globally are actively involved in advocating for more humane and just societies through addressing women's issues reflects a collective effort transcending cultural and regional distinctions (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002).

The statement that "Feminism does not exist if there is no common ground of interests in regard to gender biasness" encapsulates the essence of solidarity and shared purpose within feminism. It emphasizes the importance of finding commonalities in the pursuit of gender equality, challenging the misconception that feminism is a monolithic concept. The recognition of diverse cultural expressions in addressing women's issues reinforces the idea that feminism is a dynamic and inclusive movement, adapting to various contexts.

Feminism has transformed societal attitudes that once relegated women to mere reproducers. The global waves of feminism have played a significant role in empowering women, fostering strength, and promoting education. Notably, during the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason in the 18th century, influential thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau contributed to the emergence of feminist ideas. Although the Age of Reason supported women's education, it was often framed as a tool for reforming family, social, and civic life. Notably, Kant and Rousseau's perspectives on girls' education during this period reflected discriminatory ideologies, with a focus on preserving nature. Rousseau, in particular, argued that education should be centered on nurturing and exploring natural abilities, emphasizing the importance of not distorting one's inherent nature (Rousseau & Allan, 1979: 37).

Whenever the word 'Feminism', comes up it is often looked up as scary, vindicative, intimidating as it hints at unconventional change, at attacking the roots of women's oppression. But it is not necessarily as scary as it sounds, and it certainly does not overturn all our cherished social relations. Personal and family life remains intensely political in the sense of power relations, ad yet they are still kept relatively separate and obscured from public and political interventions. For some of us this is regrettable, but at a very least we can learn and begin to understand why these processes of cultural, political and social change in how women are regarded are so difficult to achieve and sustain (David, 2016).

Rousseau, shaped by the ideas of those who came before him, asserted that women's education should harmonize with their inherent nurturing nature and differ from that of men (Jean-Jacques, 2013: 393, 399). On the other hand, Kant, with his infamous statement "Her philosophy is not to reason, but to sense," faced criticism that labelled him as a philosopher with misogynistic tendencies. This perception

might contribute to the enduring societal stigma, prejudice, and stereotypes that continue to hinder women from accessing various fields and subjects traditionally associated with masculinity.

Feminism means the term, which advocates for women's complete equality with man in all spheres of life and the feminist movement is an organized effort for achieving such equality and right for the women. (Beauvoir, 2011). The evolution of the feminist struggle with elapse of time is often referred to as "waves" of change (Rampton, 2015). The global civilization has already passed three waves of feminism and forth wave is running since 2012. The first wave of feminism begins in the late 19th and early 20th century in the Western countries. The main target of it was to create opportunities for women. It focuses on the achieving of the women's suffrage (Rampton, 2015). This second wave feminism gave rise to women's suffrage in United States and it was a long struggle before women won the vote in 1920 (Campbell, 1989). There were many other ongoing reform movements related to women issues that time but for the suffrage movement all the women activists came for the solidarity. In this approach the explanation for women's position in society is seen in terms of unequal rights. Public citizenship and the attainment of equality with men in the public arena is central to liberal feminism. According to them women are much the same as men and they should be able to do what men do. Rather than to bring revolutionary change, liberal feminists give emphasis upon reform of society (Beasle, 1999, Adam & Sydie, 2002).

> *I would have girls regard themselves not as adjectives but as nouns- Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902).*

Postmodern feminism embraces the diversity, plurality, and distinctions inherent in postmodernist thought. Simultaneously, as postmodernism critically challenges conventional perspectives, it dismantles the prevailing 'Male-centrism' paradigm. Consequently, postmodern feminism aims to deconstruct the established notion of gender and unravel existing theories on gender relations. Additionally, the theoretical focus of postmodernism on diversity and distinctions prompts feminism to appreciate differences among individuals, groups, and subject positions. This theoretical foundation supports feminism in actively challenging and subverting the traditional gender binary in practical terms (Li, 2023).

Postmodernism emerged within intricate political circumstances following the conclusion of World War II. This development was particularly notable amidst the backdrop of the Cold War, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the proclamation of human rights, the rise of the theatre of the absurd, and the advent

of philosophies emphasizing irrationality, such as surrealism, existentialism, absurdism, and nihilism. Furthermore, the concept of deconstruction played a significant role in signifying the transition from the Modernist stage to the era of Postmodernism (Abdulazim, 2016)

Postmodern feminists question the essentialist nature of gender categories and challenge grand narratives. They focus on the diversity of women's experiences (Cixous & Clément, 1986). Postmodern thoughts target modern and humanist attempts to produce valid knowledge as misguided, and has been used to dramatic effect in criticizing feminist knowledge. Sexuality is considered a constructed category of experience, which has historical, social and cultural origins (Foucault, 1978). The advocacy which the liberal feminism stressed that women can be universally addressed was challenged by the postmodernism. Postmodernism dissolves the universal subject and postmodern feminism dissolves the possibility that women speak in a unified voice or that they can be universally addressed due to women's situatedness- the result of her specific national, class, and cultural identities. And that the experiences of every woman may not be similar with the other women across the globe. Postmodernism attempts to be historically aware, hybrid, and inclusive. Seemingly inexhaustible historical and social curiosity and a provisional and paradoxical stance (somewhat ironic, yet involved) replace the prophetic, prescriptive posture of the great masters of modernism (Hutcheon, 1988).

Postmodernist Feminists reject the binary opposites and dichotomies created by the artificial separation of the mind from the body, truth from falsehood, and subject from object. Postmodernist Feminists posit that these dualisms were created when Enlightenment philosophy adopted rationality as the key to knowledge. Postmodernist Feminism argues the version of earlier philosophers of the Enlightenment which centred around one particular group, class and society. It was not inclusive.

Postmodernist feminists dismiss the binary distinctions and dichotomies resulting from the artificial division of the mind and body, truth and falsehood, and subject and object. They assert that these dualisms originated with the Enlightenment's emphasis on rationality as the primary path to knowledge. Postmodernist feminism challenges the perspectives of earlier Enlightenment philosophers, highlighting their focus on a specific group, class, and society, which lacked inclusivity. Hence, postmodern feminism seeks to broaden the scope of understanding, incorporating diverse voices and experiences into the discourse on knowledge and truth. Postmodern feminists start with the premise that traditional feminism, rooted in modernist thinking, overly highlights gender distinctions between women and men but overlooks the variations within each gender. According to postmodern feminism definition of

patriarchy is different for every woman. It is intersectional in nature. A woman's experiences are influenced by various societal dimensions, and feminism does not always adhere to a binary perspective. Postmodern feminism recognizes the intersectional nature of a woman's experiences. This means that societal dimensions like race, class, and sexuality intersect and shape a woman's reality, challenging the idea of a singular, universal feminist perspective.

Postmodern feminism critiques traditional feminist approaches, emphasizing the importance of recognizing variations within genders, adopting an intersectional lens in understanding patriarchy, and embracing a non-binary perspective in feminist discourse. These elements collectively contribute to a more nuanced and inclusive feminist framework.

This paper aims to examine the challenges faced by female students in Sikkim from the perspective of postmodern feminism. Sikkim, situated in northeast India, is characterized by a patriarchal society with a diverse and pluralistic composition, encompassing various ethnic groups and races. Numerous studies have explored the status of women in Sikkim, consistently affirming each other's findings. According to these studies conducted by Lama (2001), Thapa (2014), and Chhetri (2014), women in Sikkim experience a greater degree of freedom compared to women in other states. However, within the array of research initiatives by the Society for Promotion of Art, Culture, Education, and Environment Excellence (SPACE), one study stands out with alarming statistics regarding violence against women in Sikkim. According to SPACE's research, half of women experience abuse at the hands of men, and approximately 4.8 percent endure mistreatment from their in-laws or relatives, often sanctioned by their husbands (SPACE; 2002). Given these concerning findings, the study strongly advocates for the establishment of a specialized entity, involving both governmental and non-governmental organizations, to ensure the protection of women from domestic violence (Rai, 2019). Postmodernist feminist research commences with the idea that "where there is society, there is gender" (Smith, 1987). The objective of postmodern feminism is to reshape societal constraints imposed on women by examining and deconstructing existing discourses. In doing so, it positions women's voices prominently in history, facilitating a genuine understanding of their perspectives. The deconstruction of gender by postmodern feminism directs public attention to individual identities rather than reinforcing specific gender norms. This process effectively eliminates stereotypes associated with both men and women, ultimately fostering authentic equality (Li, 2023). In navigating the landscape of women's access to higher education, a postmodern feminist perspective reveals a myriad of variables that intricately interweave

and diverge, constructing a nuanced tapestry of experiences. These variables, far from a uniform entity, assume diverse forms for women, even when sharing a common geographic origin.

Review of related literature

Some studies collectively emphasize the intricate interplay of cultural, familial, and societal factors influencing female students' academic pursuits. The challenges identified underscore the need for comprehensive support structures and interventions to address the multifaceted barriers faced by women in pursuing higher education. Female adult learners have comparable challenges and could not obtain adequate validation and assistance from relatives and society members (Jackman, 1999). Therefore, one major factor that could be contributing to their lower level of academic confidence is the inadequate help they receive. The studies collectively underscore the pervasive influence of familial and role conflicts on women's pursuit of higher education. In Kenya, domestic responsibilities significantly constrain female students' academic pursuits (Khaguya, 2014). In the United States, female adult students face hurdles from multiple familial and community roles, lack of self-confidence, and insufficient family and social support (Lin, 2016). Similarly, Emirati married women encounter challenges in pursuing higher education due to family and college responsibilities, leading to time constraints and limited acceptance and support for their 'student' role (Saqr et al., 2014). These findings collectively highlight the need for targeted interventions and supportive policies to address these familial and role conflicts and enhance women's access and success in higher education. There are other studies which reviewed addressing various challenges faced by women and marginalized groups in higher education across different contexts. Shaukat & Pell (2015) identified socio-cultural disparities among university students, with arts students facing more challenges. Khan, Khan & Khan (2020) emphasized socio-cultural barriers hindering women's access, including discouragement from extended families and administrative issues during studies. Sisodia (1999) focused on marginalized groups in Rajasthan, revealing persistent enrollment gaps and emphasizing factors such as institutional availability, socio-cultural dynamics, and economic conditions. Guha (1991) in the Indian context identified socio-economic factors contributing to female literacy disparities. Jacobs (1996) examined gender inequality in higher education, emphasizing disparities in access, college experiences, and post-collegiate outcomes. Adeyemi & Akpotu (2004) analyzed gender enrollment trends in Nigerian Universities, identifying significant gaps and proposing interventions such as sustained enlightenment programs and refining labor laws. Collectively, these studies underscore the need for targeted interventions and policy changes to address the identified challenges and promote inclusivity in higher education. The combined findings from Mali

(1989) and Singh and Gupta (2014) underscore pervasive challenges in women's education across various levels in India. Mali's study reveals a consistent pattern of girls trailing behind boys due to discrimination and a preference for male students, particularly evident in rural areas where basic education is more deprived. Singh and Gupta's research highlights notably low participation of Scheduled Caste women in higher education, with significant rural-urban disparities. Scheduled Caste women in urban areas have better access to educational facilities, and disparities extend across states, indicating varying literacy levels. These differences are attributed to state education policies, especially those focusing on women, and socio-cultural challenges like parental reluctance to send daughters to co-educational colleges. Together, these studies emphasize the urgent need for targeted interventions to address systemic gender and caste-based disparities in education across different regions in India.

Research Design

The current study employed a qualitative research methodology, chosen for its capacity to provide in-depth and detailed information. This approach was selected as qualitative methods, as advocated by Patton (2015), offer a rich source of comprehensive data, enabling the exploration of the issues and challenges faced by rural students, along with their coping strategies.

An open-ended interview schedule served as the data collection tool for this study. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select a sample of 14 women students participating in undergraduate, postgraduate, and research programs, both within and outside the state. As asserted by Pandya (2017), interviews were utilized as a data collection method, enabling an interactive and real-time interaction with the respondents. The collected data was then analysed and interpreted. Open coding was employed to break down the components of the interview, laying the groundwork for the analysed data.

Findings

Daughters juggle a domestic whirlwind, carrying the weight of home with grace

According to the research conducted by Khaguya (2014), it was revealed that numerous female students faced the challenge of balancing domestic responsibilities, significantly affecting their academic performance. Women are often obligated to allocate time for kitchen duties, turning education into a 'luxury' privilege for them. The burden of domestic chores remains firmly attached to women, regardless of their location or identity. Despite a woman's potential success in professions like law, medicine,

science, or academia, societal norms frequently limit her to traditional roles as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law within the home environment.

Dolma

"As the only daughter in my family, my older brother works in the state Agricultural office, and my younger brother is currently a college student, a year junior to me. I gained cooking skills in fifth grade through a natural learning process (smiles). Yet, I often question why I acquired this skill, given the responsibility of preparing daily meals, a task my two brothers don't contribute to. Even when I go out with friends, I still return home to handle dinner, making it feel like an assigned duty with no alternative. This becomes particularly challenging when I have my own assignments to complete."

Savitri

"I actively assist my mom with a range of household tasks, from cleaning and cooking to washing and buying vegetables. While I don't mind helping, it becomes frustrating when I observe my three-years-older brother living a carefree life, just sitting and eating. When I confront him about his lack of contribution, my mother tends to shield him, which I find disheartening. It feels unfair that I'm consistently held responsible, even during my exams when I have other priorities."

Passang

"I'm a student at Delhi University, and there are times when I hesitate to return home during holidays. It might sound selfish, but the reason is that when I'm home, I find myself immersed in a lot of work. My parents frequently invite guests and relatives, and I feel obligated to prepare elaborate meals and ensure their hospitality. I recently overheard my mother calling her sisters, saying, 'Now that Passang is here, come over.' It's not that I dislike entertaining guests, but it becomes overwhelming at times. Balancing all these responsibilities with my university projects often leaves me with little time to complete my work during my time at home."

In summary, these narratives collectively highlight the persistence of traditional gender roles and expectations within the families of Dolma, Savitri, and Passang. The unequal distribution of household responsibilities, the frustration arising from gendered expectations, and the impact on personal priorities illustrate the need for a re- evaluation of these roles to promote more equitable sharing of responsibilities within the family unit. The narratives highlight entrenched gendered expectations, where the daughters

are expected to take on significant roles in maintaining the household. The traditional expectation that daughters should handle cooking and other domestic tasks persists, even when they have academic or personal priorities to attend to. The pressure to balance these responsibilities with academic commitments becomes overwhelming, reflecting a clash between traditional family roles and personal aspirations.

The mere presence of a boy in the household ensures a protective shield – the privilege of being born as a son.

In the ongoing debate of gender superiority between daughters and sons, our society has persistently relegated women to a subordinate position. Exclusion of women from decision-making processes renders them vulnerable and marginalized. In Indian society, giving birth to a son is akin to receiving a trophy, symbolizing a sense of security and pride for parents.

Pedenla

"In our family, there are three daughters and a lone brother currently studying in eighth grade. It's been quietly understood, though never explicitly stated by our parents, that they visited numerous temples and monasteries in the hope of having a son. The unspoken belief is that they achieved a sort of 'trophy' when our brother was born. Frequently, relatives used to pressure my parents for another son with the metaphorical question, 'Euta aakha k aakha euta chora k chora?' —which translates to having one son being likened to having only one eye."

Sharmila

"My parents generously express their love and treat me fairly. Nevertheless, a subtle reminder of my gender persists, acknowledging that one day, I will leave the house, and the responsibility of carrying forward the family's lineage will rest solely on my brother. My grandmother frequently emphasizes the family's wealth and the need for a son to inherit it. When I assert my presence, she corrects herself, acknowledging my existence with a plain agreement".

Sonam

"I remember my mom stressing how having a boy around the house matters. Even if he's young, he adds a lot of support. She told me about a time when she was alone for many days in a less crowded village.

Feeling scared alone, she kept a young boy to give her company in the house. With him around, she felt secure and strong. That's her version of having a man in the house."

The accounts offer a critical analysis of the societal beliefs surrounding gender roles and the perceived privilege associated with having sons. The personal narratives enrich the discussion by providing individual experiences that reflect and reinforce these societal dynamics. One of the data highlight the notion that the mere presence of a boy in the household is seen as a protective shield, attributing a certain privilege to being born as a son. This perspective contributes to the ongoing debate of gender superiority, where sons are often considered to hold a higher status in society. The data also asserts that the persistent relegation of women to a subordinate position in the gender debate results in their exclusion from decision-making processes. This exclusion, in turn, leaves women vulnerable and marginalized within the societal structure. It also delves into the societal perception in Indian culture, describing the birth of a son as akin to receiving a trophy. This symbolizes a sense of security and pride for parents, perpetuating the belief that having a male child is not only a familial asset but also reflects the traditional beliefs tied to lineage and inheritance, where the responsibility is often assigned to male heirs. Also, one of the narratives also suggest that the symbolic role of a male presence goes beyond societal expectations and can extend to providing a sense of security.

Education, particularly higher education, has often been framed as a luxury, with women facing additional challenges in accessing it especially for married women.

Women are often viewed as commodities, and despite societal advancements, it takes time for mentalities to evolve beyond traditional and narrow-minded perspectives. Married women, in particular, frequently face barriers to pursuing higher education, as family members may discourage it, citing expectations of being a dedicated housewife and daughter-in-law. Stereotyping of married women persists in our society, contributing to these challenges.

Ongmula

"I entered marriage while still in school, a teenage relationship that swiftly transformed into matrimony. Post-marriage, my education came to a standstill, contrasting with my friends who continued their college pursuits. My elder sister persistently motivated me to resume my studies, taking the lead in enrolling me for distance education, enabling me to complete my graduation. Upon expressing my aspiration to pursue a master's degree through regular attendance, my husband

supported me, though his family had reservations. However, upon discovering that I would receive stipends or scholarships, they eventually consented. Despite this achievement, there are numerous sacrifices associated with my decision, such as the traditional expectations of serving guests as a daughter-in-law and taking on the role of a nurse when someone falls ill."

The nature of women's motivation to pursue higher education are multi- dimensional. While they may share common cultural values, the reasons behind their educational pursuits vary significantly. Individual interpretations of life events play a crucial role in shaping these motivations, indicating that personal experiences and perspectives contribute to the diversity of women's educational goals.

Engaging in higher education following marriage has consistently been and remains a demanding and challenging endeavour for women.

Anjana

"Embarking on higher education immediately after marriage is challenging (sighs), as familial issues often pose distractions, and pursuing a Ph.D. is no easy feat. Now, I'm concerned about the possibility of not securing a job matching my qualifications after completing my Ph.D. Many of my friends have found positions in both government and private colleges. Convincing my family that a Ph.D. is a time-consuming process and not an overnight endeavour proves to be quite difficult. Juggling the responsibilities of both family and education simultaneously adds to the stress."

The data provides a comprehensive analysis of the challenges women, particularly married women, encounter in accessing higher education. It underscores the persistence of gender stereotypes and societal expectations, emphasizing the need for broader cultural shifts to enable women to pursue education without facing significant barriers. The personal narratives add depth to the discussion by illustrating the real-life experiences of women navigating these challenges. The narratives emphasize the persistent view of women as commodities, indicating that despite societal advancements, traditional and narrow-minded perspectives still influence perceptions of women's roles and choices. This view contributes to the challenges women face in pursuing higher education, especially after marriage. Specific challenges for married women in accessing higher education are outlined. Family members may discourage pursuing education, expecting them to prioritize traditional roles as dedicated housewives and daughters-in-law. Stereotyping of married women further compounds these challenges, reflecting deeply ingrained societal expectations.

Age issue is becoming a problem for women while pursing higher education.

In the narrative shaped by our society, there exists a pervasive belief that age holds significant weight, particularly for women. Once a woman crosses the threshold of 30, a cascade of societal issues emerges—challenges in finding a suitable groom, concerns about fertility, and the apprehension of daughters marrying outside the confines of community and state boundaries. This narrative reflects the intricate dynamics of postmodern feminist perspectives.

Nikita

"Upon expressing my desire to pursue higher studies to my mother, she fell silent and then shared her perspective. She emphasized the importance of women being mindful of their bodily changes, explaining that as we age, compromises may be necessary to find an ideal partner and conceive. She suggested that getting married early and having children while young could lead to a more fulfilling life, implying that postponing education until later might be a way to avoid life complications."

Roshni

"When I arrive home late from the department after classes, finding a taxi becomes challenging. On such occasions, I often encounter disapproving looks from my father and brother. Fortunately, my close relationship with my mom ensures that she is always aware of my whereabouts, and she keeps my father and brother informed. Despite this, when I arrive home late, I find myself having to enter the house discreetly, as though I have committed a serious transgression. My mother shared with me recently that my father harboured concerns about the possibility of me eloping with someone from a different caste. "Yesley hamro nakh katcha hola ek din" was the proper phrase she had used."

Dichen

"My father's younger sister, my aunt, chose love over familial expectations by marrying a South Indian man. Unfortunately, her decision led to her being boycotted by the family, a cautionary tale for all the daughters in our family. The fear of facing a similar fate loom over us if we were to follow in her footsteps. Understanding that seeking permission to pursue my graduation in Delhi might be futile, I tactically applied to colleges online. Presenting my father with the printed list upon receiving the results, I conveyed my fervent desire to study outside. Despite putting my heart into this endeavour, he

did not grant permission, leaving me disheartened. There are moments when I can't shake the feeling that I was born into a society that places significant hurdles in the path of personal aspirations.”

These three narratives provide a nuanced perspective on the challenges faced by women within the context of familial expectations, societal norms, and personal aspirations. These also highlights the ongoing pressure on women to conform to traditional roles and the sacrifices often expected of them. The disapproving looks and the need to enter the house discreetly suggest a sense of surveillance and control over women's actions, fuelled by concerns about caste and societal expectations. This narrative exposes the challenges women encounter in navigating societal perceptions of their behaviour and choices. The attempt to pursue higher education outside the prescribed boundaries is met with resistance, reflecting the societal barriers and limited agency women may experience in pursuing personal aspirations. It also reveals how age is intricately linked to perceptions of fulfilment, ideal timing for life events, and the potential for complications, reflecting broader cultural expectations surrounding women's life choices.

Mansplaining and sexism serve as mechanisms to silence women, perpetuating historical barriers that have excluded them from discussions and decision-making processes.

Sexism persists within the realm of higher education, where female students often encounter objectification and are viewed as burdensome. They are consistently portrayed in unfavourable light, with their perspectives routinely disregarded. The prevalence of mansplaining further exacerbates the challenges faced by women in higher education.

Smita

"I have consistently delivered speeches and hosted various college events. My name was frequently associated with these activities, sometimes even without my knowledge I often found myself unexpectedly assigned the role of MC. But I disapprove of the practice where girls are expected to present khadas (local garlands) to guests and display hospitality tasks such as serving tea and snacks during functions. It seems unfair that while the boys enjoy themselves in the hall, girls are burdened with such chores. College should be an inclusive institution for all, and it's disheartening to see only girls being designated for these tasks."

Rajeena

"Studying away from my home state presents its share of challenges. Both within and outside the university, we often encounter racial comments, which has become a regular thing for us. Over time, I've grown accustomed to these comments. Unfortunately, some male professors and fellow male batchmates consistently overlook our contributions during class discussions and dismiss our requests for clarification on certain topics. Even our close male friends sometimes mockingly claim, 'I'll explain it to her; she's a bit slow,' accompanied by laughter. What's disheartening is that even professors join in the laughter. But when it comes to addressing their own questions or concerns; they are insistent on receiving prompt solutions without any interference from us."

Ongkit

"While parking my scooty in the university's designated parking area for students, I faced an incident where a senior student, one year ahead of me, chided me. When I inquired about the reason for his uncalled approach, he responded by making a disapproving comment about the capabilities of girls, suggesting that there was no need for us women to strive to be on par with men. Although I tried to defuse the situation and sought clarification on what I had done wrong, he insisted that my parking was inadequate, causing inconvenience for him to park his bike. Despite my assurance that I had parked it correctly, he continued to criticize and express dissatisfaction."

Sashi

"Female teachers in our college expect us to dress appropriately for sports activities. Interestingly, while boys often wear vests and pull up their shorts without facing consequences. We, girls find ourselves subject to briefings and lectures if we slightly deviate from the dress code which they had conformed. Despite being engaged in matches, we are not permitted to wear shorts; instead, we must opt for loose tights or joggers and slightly oversized shirts".

Collectively, these narratives paint a picture of a higher education environment where sexism and gender-based expectations persist, hindering the full participation and equal treatment of women. The personal stories shared by the individuals serve as poignant examples of the broader challenges women face in breaking down historical barriers within educational institutions. It highlights the persistent challenges faced by female students, including objectification, dismissive attitudes, and unequal treatment. The imposition of specific rules and restrictions on female attire, in contrast to more lenient standards for male students, underscores the unequal and often arbitrary enforcement of gender norms.

The mockery and dismissive behaviour from male friends and professors contribute to an environment where the contributions and concerns of female students are not given due consideration.

Educational institutions fail to address the requirements of student-mothers, indicating a lack of inclusivity.

Students can embody various forms and genders. Unfortunately, our patriarchal society tends to overlook the significance of students who are also mothers. Many students, either by their own choice or coercion, enter marriage early in life. The societal perception often dictates that a woman's life is deemed complete upon marriage, and the idea of a married woman simultaneously pursuing education is frequently disregarded. The absence of a crèche facility for nursing student-mothers serves as a stark illustration of how women's issues are superficially acknowledged and often dismissed.

"I am currently a student and a mother to a 4-month-old child whom I am still nursing. My marriage was arranged, and despite facing initial challenges in pursuing a PhD right after completing my MPhil, I didn't give up. After getting married, I attempted the PhD again following the birth of my daughter. I chose not to leave the state due to my baby, feeling it would be selfish of me to do so. Fortunately, I successfully gained admission as a scholar. However, the absence of a dedicated university campus and the lack of a childcare facility are making it difficult for me to attend classes. To overcome this obstacle, my husband joins me twice a day. We either visit a nearby canteen or, at times, I use our car as a quiet space to feed my baby."

This case underscores the diverse identities within student populations and draws attention to the oversight of the unique challenges faced by student-mothers in a patriarchal society. The early marriages that some students enter into, whether willingly or under pressure, reflect societal expectations that often prioritize a woman's life fulfilment through marriage. Consequently, the simultaneous pursuit of education by married women is commonly undervalued.

The absence of a childcare facility for nursing student-mothers is presented as a concrete example highlighting the superficial acknowledgment and dismissal of women's issues. This situation underscores a broader societal trend where the needs of women who juggle education and motherhood are not adequately addressed, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive and supportive approach to accommodate diverse student experiences.

Conclusion

Women grapple with the burden of domestic responsibilities, transforming education into a perceived luxury due to societal expectations of prioritizing kitchen duties. Despite excelling in various professions, societal norms confine women to traditional roles within the home. The persistent relegation of women to subordinate positions in the gender debate perpetuates their exclusion from decision-making processes, rendering them vulnerable. In Indian society, the birth of a son is celebrated, symbolizing security and pride, perpetuating the commodification of women. Married women face barriers to higher education, discouraged by familial expectations of devoted housewifery. Balancing education with marriage poses significant challenges for Indian women. However, there is a limited scholarly exploration of how marriage impacts women's education, with only a few studies suggesting that early marriage, childbearing, and parenthood negatively affect women's educational attainment post-marriage (Teachman & Polonko, 1988; Hofferth et al., 2001; Hango & Bourdais, 2007). Ageism compounds challenges for women, with societal pressures intensifying after the age of 30, impacting marriage prospects and fertility concerns. Postmodern feminist perspectives highlight the intricate dynamics perpetuating sexism in higher education, where female students face objectification and mansplaining. Additionally, the societal disregard for student-mothers exemplifies the deep-seated biases that persist, further marginalizing women's issues.

Education, viewed through a postmodern feminist lens, emerges as a transformative force, dismantling oppressive structures and promoting genuine equality. The pursuit of education should embody a commitment to empowering individuals, transcending gender barriers, and fostering a society where diversity and inclusion flourish. the pursuit of gender equality and inclusivity, women are making strides across various spheres of life. Embracing the philosophy of "sapere aude" – having the courage to use one's own reason – women are charting paths of progress and empowerment.

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