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## From Barriers to Pathways: Women's Experiences in Higher Education

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### ABSTRACT

Women's access to and experiences in higher education have been the subject of scholarly and policy attention for decades as it is an important driver of social and economic mobility of women. Though, over the past several decades, women have made significant gains in terms of enrollment in higher education but they still face a range of barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education. It is in this light, this paper aims to explore the perspectives of women on their higher education journey, including the challenges they faced and the strategies they used to overcome them. The study uses a qualitative research approach, and data is collected through in-depth interviews with a diverse group of women who have pursued higher education from Panjab University in different fields and at different levels. Through this approach, we seek to understand how women experience and navigate higher education. The findings of the study reveal that women's experiences in higher education are complex and varied. Women's backgrounds, socioeconomic status, race, and family responsibilities all play a role in their experiences. They face a range of challenges including gender-based discrimination, societal judgements and cultural barriers. Despite these challenges, women have developed various strategies to overcome them, including seeking out support from families & peers and building networks to pursue higher education for themselves. In this sense, this paper contributes to the existing literature on gendered perspectives on higher education by

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providing a nuanced understanding of individual aspirations and societal barriers to education. Our findings highlight the need for educational policies and interventions that support the success of women in higher education and promote positive outlook in the society towards women's education.

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## **Introduction**

The development of any country can only be considered complete when it includes all sections of society without discrimination. Even after more than seventy years of Independence, India's progress has been hindered by the inadequate participation of women in the field of education. Historically, the role of women in Indian society was primarily restricted to domestic duties and child-rearing. However, with the advent of education, women have gradually begun to break out of these traditional roles and pursue academic and professional careers. In terms of women's access to higher education, there have been many strides made in recent years to improve the educational landscape for women in India. According to the latest available data from the Ministry of Education, Government of India, in the year 2019-20, the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) for women in higher education was 27.4%, which is an improvement from the GER of 23.6% in 2014-15. However, despite this progress, women still lag behind men in terms of enrollment in higher education, and there are significant disparities in access to higher education among different regions and social groups. Education serves as a powerful tool that empowers women, strengthening their ability to resist subjugation and equipping them to navigate the patriarchal structures of the outside world by overcoming barriers to realizing their economic potential (Kabeer, 2005). Therefore, it becomes essential to examine the factors that hinder women from fully achieving their educational aspirations.

This paper tries to disentangle the complex issue of providing educational access to women and their response towards such access. The major focus is on understanding the complexities that lie in the life of an educated woman. It is, in this backdrop, this study aims to provide an insight into the experiences of educated women who have successfully navigated higher education in India, and identifies key strategies and best practices that can be used to support and empower women in academic environments. By highlighting the challenges faced by women and the strategies they used to overcome these challenges, we can help to inform policy and practice aimed at improving access and support for women in higher education. Ultimately, by breaking down the barriers that limit women's access to education, we can help to create a more equitable and just society for all.



For the purpose of the study, we adopted a qualitative approach where we gathered data from women who have completed their post-graduation in various fields from Panjab University. We employed purposive sampling to select 20 participants, coming from a range of academic disciplines and backgrounds, who were willing to share their experiences and perceptions related to pursuing higher education. Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that were conducted face-to-face or via video conferencing. The interviews were designed to elicit narratives from the participants on their motivation to pursue higher education, challenges faced during their academic journey, and how they overcame those challenges.

### ***Women's Education in India: A Historical Overview***

The history of female education in the nation has been characterized by major issues, such as social and cultural hurdles, economical limitations, and political restrictions. Indian mythology is rich with stories of highly educated and evolved women. We embrace womanhood that our deity of education is a woman. One can trace the historical evidence of ancient Indian education to the 3rd century B.C. when education was imparted orally and many women scholars were part of it. Some renowned educational institutes, like Nalanda, Vikramshila, and Takshila, were founded when Buddhism expanded to India. Research shows that a number of women were enrolled in these temples of learning.

These universities thrived from about the 5th century to 13th century. The Muslim emperors established universities in Delhi, Lucknow, and Allahabad in the eleventh century. Women had taken part in all areas of knowledge such as theology, religion, philosophy, fine arts, and astronomy. However, it was discovered that access to education nonetheless remained restricted to a particular social class. Not everybody had access to it. Later, when the British arrived in India, English missionaries supported women's education. As a result, by the end of the 19th century, a considerable number of women were receiving degrees from colleges and universities. This increase in female education was greatly influenced by the social reform movement of the 19th century, which had its roots in the Indian intelligentsia and eventually spread to portions of the middle classes. However, this movement was mostly an urban phenomenon.

Beginning in the early 20th century, there was a shift in emphasis towards educating women in order to aid them become better mothers and housewives as well as to support the growth of their countries through the education of the children they produce. However, the focus of the Indian independence struggle was on educating women in order to empower the general public and oppose colonial control.



After India gained independence, there was a significant focus on boosting access to education and encouraging gender equality. The government established institutions to promote women's education, and policies were implemented to increase girls' enrolment. However, there were also challenges during this period, including the shift towards a more market-oriented approach to education that led to higher disparities in access to education. Despite these obstacles, women's education in India has advanced significantly in recent years, with more and more girls enrolling in schools and institutions.

According to the Census of India 2011, the female literacy rate in the country was 65.46%, a significant improvement from 54.16% in 2001. However, this still lags behind the male literacy rate of 82.14%. In spite of government initiatives like *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* (Save the daughter, Educate the daughter), which seek to advance gender equality and increase the enrollment and retention of girls in schools, women's access to higher education is still restricted. Only 45.9% of all students enrolled in higher education were women, according to the All-India Survey on Higher Education, 2020–21.

The journey of women's education in India has been marked by significant progress, but there is still a long way to go to achieve gender parity in access to education, particularly in higher education. Therefore, it becomes pertinent to look for reasons for low number of women showing up to pursue higher education.

### ***Navigating Educational Barriers: Voices from the Field***

The decision to pursue higher education may be a liberating and empowering experience for women nevertheless the journey is often fraught with challenges and obstacles. Despite the motivation and determination to pursue higher education, they have to go through many roadblocks to reach the destination. As Sharma and Singh (2017) puts it, "Despite the impressive gains made by women in higher education, they continue to face multiple barriers, including social norms that reinforce gender roles and expectations, lack of support from family and society, and inadequate facilities in educational institutions."

This section of the study is based on the multidimensional challenges that the women in our study faced during their pursuit of higher education. Based on the narratives of women respondents, the challenges have been categorized into financial, societal, institutional and personal challenges.

Financial constraints are one of the most significant barriers that women face when attempting to pursue higher education. The women in our study encountered a range of challenges while pursuing their higher education, but they also demonstrated resilience and determination in overcoming them. The high cost of



education, coupled with the financial burden on families, makes it challenging for women to gain access to higher education. Many of the participants belonged to families with limited resources, and had to juggle work and study to support themselves. Some had to borrow money to pay for their education, which led to further stress and anxiety. Several women in our study had to find alternative sources of income to fund their education. One participant, Payal, had to work part-time to pay for her tuition fees and support her family financially. Preeti, a Master's student in Political Science, worked as a freelance writer to support herself while pursuing her studies.

Another respondent, Neha, a postgraduate student in Economics, put it, "Despite financial constraints, I challenged myself to push my limits and see how far I could go in my academic pursuits. "Apart from that, many women in our study had to take on additional responsibilities to support their families, such as working part-time jobs, which made it difficult for them to balance their academic and personal lives. Such financial constraints not only limit access to education but also impact the quality of education and career opportunities available to women.

Societal challenges came out to be another significant hurdle for some women respondents. Cultural and societal norms often limit women's autonomy and mobility, making it challenging to access educational opportunities. Women are still expected to prioritize their domestic responsibilities over their education, making it difficult to balance both. Some women in our study had to fight societal norms and stereotypes to pursue higher education. Shweta, a participant in our study, faced criticism and disapproval from her family and community for pursuing a degree in engineering, which is typically considered a male-dominated field.

One common thing that we observed in a few cases was that families still hold the view that educating their daughters is a waste of resources, as they will eventually get married and move away from home. Moreover, educated women are often viewed as being too ambitious or not conforming to traditional gender roles. Riya, a 26-year-old law student, talks about how she had to convince her family to support her decision to pursue higher education. She shared-

"My family didn't initially support my decision to study law. They thought it to be a waste of time and told me that I should focus on getting married instead. It took a lot of convincing and persistence on my part to show them that this was something I was passionate about and that it would ultimately benefit our family in the long run."



Another respondent, Neha who is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Business Management, shared-" I had to let go of a boy I had plans to marry, because of me being more educated than the boy. I was considered arrogant and not a suitable fit for the boy." This way, the persistent impact of social and cultural norms continues to limit the opportunities that women should have and reinforce gender stereotypes. Gautam (2015) explains that this trend is persistent in many societies where education is thought to be the most necessary qualification for women, not because they should participate in the workforce, but because it is an important prerequisite for a girl's marriage. Sex role expectations lead both men and women to stay within the confines of gender stereotypes right from childhood through the socialization process. Hence, the value of education for women is misconstrued not as a path to empowerment but as a passport to marriage (Ibid).

Apart from societal issues, health issues, such as mental health problems, also came out to be important hurdles to women's ability to access and succeed in higher education. Some women in our study shared their personal struggles, such as coping with anxiety and depression and safety issues while pursuing their degrees. Anjali, a 23-year-old engineering student, talks about the safety concerns she faces while commuting to and from campus. "I lived in an area that wasn't very safe, and I had to commute for over an hour to get to the university. I've had some scary incidents, like being followed by strangers or being harassed on public transport."

The above narrative reveals how inadequate institutional support can also pose significant challenges for women pursuing higher education. Many of the women in our study reported feeling isolated and unsupported in their academic pursuits because of limited access to resources and mentorship. Despite these challenges, women in India continue to pursue higher education at increasing rates, driven by a desire to improve their lives and make meaningful contributions to society. As Ali and Rathore (2015) observe, "Women's education in India is seen as a critical tool for promoting gender equality and empowering women to participate fully in all aspects of social and economic life. While many steps have been taken by the government but some battles are better fought at the level of individual agency and support system (Ibid).

### ***Against the Odds: Women Confronting Barriers***

However, despite these challenges, the participants demonstrated remarkable strength and resourcefulness in navigating their paths to success. Many of them found support in the form of peer groups, mentors, and role models, who encouraged them to pursue their academic goals. Others challenged societal stereotypes by excelling in traditionally male-dominated fields such as Science and



Engineering For instance, Priya, a Master's student in Computer Science, had to overcome significant resistance from her family when she decided to pursue a career in technology field. However, with the support of her female friends, she was able to complete her degree and secure a job at a leading software firm.

Furthermore, the participants drew on their personal qualities, such as perseverance, resilience, and a sense of purpose, to stand up for their rights and complete their education. Pooja, a postgraduate student in Political Science, explained, "I wanted to prove that women are just as capable as men in these fields, and that we have a right to pursue our dreams and ambitions." This sentiment is supported by the concept of "choice feminism," which argues that women should be free to pursue their own goals and ambitions without being restricted by traditional gender roles and expectations. By pursuing higher education, these women are challenging the patriarchal norms that have traditionally confined women to domestic spaces and limited their opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Many also paved their way to break free from traditional gender roles and societal expectations through the support of their parents. For instance, one participant described how she drew inspiration from her mother's sacrifices and dedication to education, and how this motivated her to pursue her own dreams. As she puts it "It is only because of having an educated and fearless mother that I was able to come to a far-off city and have an education." Therefore, familial support played a major role in defining the educational journeys of these women as Hussein and Shukri (2018) argues that women who come from families with higher levels of education are more likely to pursue higher education. Additionally, cultural norms that emphasize the importance of women's education and their role in the workforce can also influence their motivations. However, this is not the case with other women we interviewed. Their parents despite being educated wanted the best of education for their daughters as one respondent puts it "My education was actually their way of living the life they never had. They did not have the resources or familial support to educate themselves. But they are fulfilling their dreams and lost hope through their children." The role of parents proves to be an important deciding factor in the journeys these women undertake. The narratives of these women are a testimony to the fact. Therefore, to provide increased access to women, localized and grass root level efforts are needed where families become the main targets to bring about societal changes.

These narratives highlight the ways in which women in India are challenging traditional gender norms and overcoming societal and economic barriers to pursue higher education. However, they also point to the ongoing struggles that women face in accessing education and achieving their goals. As feminist



scholar bell hooks argues, "the process of education is a practice of freedom, yet women who want to be free have had to fight for access to this practice." (Hooks, 1994). Still, there are many ongoing struggles that we are yet to fight and conquer to provide with equal educational access to women and enhanced opportunities to make use of this education.

## Conclusion

The narratives on the study reveal that despite the progress made in recent years, gender inequality in education continues to persist. The educational trajectories of these women showcase the complexity of these challenges and the various ways in which they impact women's educational journeys. From financial constraints and family expectations to societal stereotypes and discrimination, these challenges are multifaceted and intersecting. However, the narratives also highlight the resilience, resourcefulness, and determination of these women to overcome these obstacles and succeed in their academic pursuits. Some sought support from family members or mentors, while others relied on their own internal strength and perseverance. It is important to note that while these narratives offer valuable insights into the experiences of women pursuing higher education in India, they are not representative of all women's experiences. The sample size of our study was limited, and there may be variations in experiences across different regions and socio-economic backgrounds. Nonetheless, the study provides a window into the challenges faced by many women in India and the ways in which they navigate them.

This study has important implications for both policy and research. The narratives can inform policymakers about the challenges that women face in accessing higher education and guide the creation of policies that promote educational access to women. One promising solution to improve women's access to higher education in India is the use of technology and online education platforms as they are cost-effective than traditional classroom-based programs and eliminate the need for physical infrastructure, textbooks, and other educational materials. Other solutions include expanding access to scholarships and financial assistance programs for women, providing mentorship and networking opportunities, and raising awareness of the importance of women's education through public campaigns and community outreach programs. Apart from this, establishing women's hostels near educational institutions can provide safe and affordable accommodation for women who have to relocate to attend college or university. To summarize, increased access to financial incentives along with localised and community level efforts with the help of various governmental and non-governmental agencies can lead a long way to provide equal and substantial educational benefits to women and the nation at large.



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