

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Higher Education and Social Stereotypes: Exploring Indian Women's Perspectives

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**Research Domain:** International Perspectives and context (IPC)

**Abstract:** Education of women has been considered as one of the crucial agencies for bringing about social development, social change, empowerment and subsequently social mobility. Higher education has been accorded a major position in such transformations, as at this stage learners may receive the opportunity to engage with critical texts and chart their future paths. These critical engagements may promote economic upliftment as well as socio-cultural development in the life of women. All these might also help in developing critical outlook amongst them on social stereotypes too. This paper probes upon such concerns and possibilities and draws on findings from an empirical project titled 'Higher Education and Social Mobility of Women: A Sociological Study of Haryana (India)'. It engages with exploring the critical question does higher education influence the perspectives of women towards social stereotypes? If yes, what are the new frames of thought?

**Paper:**

INTRODUCTION

Gender disparities in education have long been a topic of research. Traditionally, women's access to education has been constrained and this is more severe in the case of global south nations such as India (Gupta, 2010). Socio-cultural and economic factors play a crucial role in impeding women's educational trajectories (Beauvoir, 1983; Chanana, 2001). The elimination of this difference has been a priority of development organizations as well as international agencies such as World Bank and UNO (Dhar, 2014; David, 2016). In India, the government has implemented various positive discrimination policies such as scholarships and reservation to increase the access of women in higher education institutions. But the crucial question still remains: Is this increase in access playing any role in the development of a better society? Are women who are accessing higher education (HE) becoming more critical about the social stereotypes or are they maintaining the status quo? This paper focuses on the above concerns and is a part of a study titled 'Higher Education and Social Mobility of Women: A Sociological Study of Haryana (India)'. The paper tries to understand the influence of HE on women's perspectives towards social stereotypes.

LITERATURE

REVIEW

Education acts as a socializing agent through which a person comes to know about social realities (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Chanana (1988) and Dube (2001) explained this in the context of women and elaborated that education systems have traditionally facilitated the process of internalization of 'feminine' identity and social responsibilities among women. But now the situation is changing. In today's scenario, education is not only considered a tool for gaining literacy, rather it is also an active medium of enabling the agency amongst women to question the oppressions and differentiations persistent in the larger social context (Sharma, 2006; Parimala, 2009; Jabvala and Sharma, 2015). In the same light, education of women has also been considered as one of the crucial apparatuses for bringing about social changes, social transformations, social development, empowerment and subsequently social mobility in the life of women. In addition to this, HE has been accorded a major position in bringing socio-economic and political upliftment in the life of women because at this stage learners may receive the opportunity to engage with critical texts and also pave the way of their future (Rao, 2003; Rege, 2010; Parimala, 2017). In this way, education plays dual role, firstly in developing a consensus among the society and secondly by providing spaces for conflicts and contestations (Madan, 2013; Kohli, 2017). This paradoxical role of education and especially HE provides space to interrogate its role in (re)producing the perspectives towards social stereotypes amongst women who are pursuing HE (Warton, 2005).

## METHODOLOGY

The major concern of this research project is to understand the interrelationship between HE and social mobility amongst women of Haryana (India). The interpretivist paradigm has been used to comprehend this interrelationship. A mixed method research design has been adopted. At the outset, the researcher used a questionnaire to understand the perspective of women towards social stereotypes; 50 women who were at different levels in their HE, starting from undergraduate to doctoral level, participated. Following this, 10 interviews and 2 focus group discussions were conducted with some survey participants so as to develop a deeper understanding of the influence of HE in developing as well as changing the perspectives of women towards social stereotypes. The whole study is guided from the lenses of feminist research methodology which provides space for subjective ideas and agency of women (Menon, 2012; Wickramasinghe, 2014).

## FINDINGS

1) Caste and class-based Stereotypes: Glimpses of Change and Stagnation  
Enhanced mobility and exposure to varied social space due to educational opportunities are leading to change in the attitudes of women, as these changes are eradicating social divisions which are prominent in the traditional Indian social system. Other public spaces like educational institutions, markets and eateries are creating new forms of caste-neutral spaces to some extent. Further, the younger generation, having increased self-worth, self-identity and education have a somewhat different attitude towards caste and class-based differences and are forming mixed caste and class groups. Approximately 97% participants shared in their responses of questionnaire that they have friends who belong to different caste-class group. This was further validated in personal interviews when participants were asked to share details about their friends. But when the questions were asked about the matrimonial alliances, the majority of women rejected the idea and about 62% of them shared that inter-caste marriage alliances are not permitted in the society and women are still expected accord with the social norms of marrying within caste groups During focus group

discussions, one of the respondents also validated the social norms in the words “developing alliances between people of lower and upper castes is like making a donkey stand on a horse. Staying and eating together is fine but marriage between both of them is not acceptable”.

## 2) Gender Roles: A Contested Space

The major shift in ideas about social stereotypes is evident in the area of gender roles. Majority of women who were in professional courses like engineering, medical and management or were staying away from their families shared in their questionnaire responses that home and childcare responsibilities are not their prerogatives. This can also be traced from their working culture as women in these fields have longer working hours, and sharing of household responsibilities is the main demand of these women. Around 87% of them desired to have life partners who provide support in household works. Whereas, the responses of women who were pursuing their undergraduate degree in liberal courses from distance learning mode or from state-level universities was starkly different. In interviews as well as focus group discussions they shared that mother is the primary caregiver of the child and household responsibilities are meant majorly for women. So, the level and mode of education, as well as other forms of exposures, plays a very crucial role in defining the notions of women about social roles and stereotypes.

## CONCLUSION

HE plays a dual role. On the one hand, it maintains the status quo in the society, but on the other hand it also provides the space for contestations and conflicts. This is also evident in this study as the majority of women are challenging the caste-class based hierarchy, but shows reservations when it comes to matrimonial alliances. Further, the women who are pursuing professional education such as engineering, medical or management are more critical about gender roles and stereotypes than those who are doing their HE from distance mode. So, the level of education and mode of education also seems to play a crucial role in formulating women’s perspectives towards social stereotypes.

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