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Gendered Trajectories and an Expansive Concept of Access to Higher Education in Haryana, India

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Abstract: Across the world, barriers to accessing higher education are understood as a complex combination of intersectional factors such as gender, social class, race and ethnicity. While access to higher education is increasing in a massified higher education system, and representation of women in higher education is reaching gender parity, there is a dearth of research in the Indian context on the complexities of gendered access to higher education. This paper, based on a comparative case study of two colleges, focuses on modulations of the concept of 'access' to explore the gendered trajectories of young people into higher education in the Indian context. The specific context of this study is government colleges in the state of Haryana in North India. The core argument of the paper is that an expansive concept of access to higher education is needed to explore gendered differences in how higher education is accessed.

Paper: Across the world, barriers to accessing higher education are understood as a complex combination of intersectional factors such as gender, social class, race and ethnicity (Gayle, Berridge and Davies 2002). In India, the prominent intersecting factors which impact upon access are gender, social class and caste^[1]. While access to higher education is increasing in a massified higher education system (Tierney and Sabharwal 2016), and representation of women in higher education is reaching gender parity, there is a dearth of research in the Indian context on the complexities of gendered access to higher education. Internationally, parity in terms of cumulative numbers of women in educational spaces is considered a major milestone in terms of achieving social equity, however this has been strongly criticized for ignoring inequalities at the micro level (Leathwood and Read, 2009; David, 2015; Smith, 2017). Insightful research has shown that there is differential access on a gendered basis to quality institutions of higher education for young women (Sudarshan 2018, John 2012). This paper focuses on modulations of the concept of 'access' to explore the gendered trajectories of young people into higher education in the Indian context, arguing that an expansive concept of access is necessary to explore the ways in which gender affects young people's educational futures (Gautam 2015).

The specific context of this study is government colleges in the state of Haryana in North India. There are several different types of public and private universities in India (Tierney and Sabharwal 2016). Government college fees are significantly cheaper than those of the private colleges and are often accessed by more economically and socially marginalized communities. This makes government colleges significant sites of access to higher education for students, especially for those who are first generation entrants into higher education.

This paper addresses two questions. *Firstly (RQ1), who gains access to higher education through government colleges?* This question explores the social background of the students who access undergraduate courses in the government colleges in Haryana, examining gender in relation to other factors such as caste and family background. *Secondly (RQ2), what are the educational trajectories and decision-making processes that have brought the students to the sampled colleges, and how are these gendered?* The core argument of the paper is that an expansive concept of access to higher education is needed to explore gendered differences in how higher education is accessed.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a study which is part of a larger five-year project on gender and access to higher education in Haryana. This study is based on the pilot phase which followed a mixed methods design with a structured questionnaire survey completed by students in each college; FGDs (focus group discussions) with students; semi-structured interviews with students and management representatives. The data from the questionnaires were entered, coded and descriptively analysed through SPSS software whereas the qualitative FGDs and interviews were analysed thematically and using a narrative analysis (RQ1). The analysis process for RQ2 involved compiling detailed 'access narratives' from the student interviews to determine the actors and factors, gendered and otherwise, that contributed to the specific form of access to higher education experienced by the students.

FINDINGS

(RQ1) The survey shows that a majority of the students were day-scholars and lived very close to the college, confirming that government colleges provide a local form of access to higher education. This was particularly true for women, who had a comparatively shorter journey to college than men. Most of the participants in all the three colleges were first generation higher education students, particularly in the more rural college. Although cumulative survey sample approached gender parity, there were important distinctions between the colleges. While two colleges were in close proximity to a women's colleges, and therefore had comparatively fewer women one of the colleges was in the process of becoming a women's only college with a separate men's college nearby in a more rural location. Local factors relating to the availability of same-gender and co-educational colleges and their accessibility via affordable and direct transport means affected which students could access higher education through these institutions.

(RQ2) The survey indicated that the students' parents, siblings and family members were highly involved with the decision-making process to attend the colleges. While young women's social networks were predominantly limited to the immediate family, young men had wider social networks with seniors and community members, and were able to access information and advice from more educated and experienced sources. It should be noted that there is a limited outreach culture for these institutions, which heightens the role of informal knowledge networks in determining

specificities of access to higher education (Reay David and Ball, 2005). The access narratives reveal complexities underlying the survey results. For example, parents were found to be a major influence, the interviews revealed that, because of their own limited educational experiences, parents tended to encourage their children to access higher education to avail themselves of opportunities they themselves were unable to access, but were unable to provide informed assistance with specific choices. In the case of women students, this tended to result in choosing the closest college (irrespective of academic merit), and choosing colleges based for example on the reputation of a college as being safer for women (i.e. not promiscuous). An expansive concept of access to higher education therefore decentres the individual student and considers the student's agency in relation to their gendered position within a complex network of actors in the family and community, each of whom have different stakes in the student's educational trajectory.

CONCLUSION

This study of government colleges in Haryana has localized and internationally relevant findings. In the Haryanvi and Indian context, it is important to develop an expansive concept of access to higher education that takes into account the significant role played by families in the educational choices of undergraduate students. Recognising the ways in which students are positioned as gendered individuals within gendered family and community structures, and the effect of this on the specific conditions of access to higher education, is also an imperative for international understandings of access to higher education, which have traditionally taken a more individualistic approach to access.

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[\[1\]](#)This a form of social hierarchy determined by birth. It involves social discrimination and prejudice against individuals from lower caste communities. It is also associated with historical and contemporary social exclusion from educational and economic opportunities.