
THE ROLE OF FAMILY AND SOCIETY IN PROMOTING WOMEN'S EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

There is consensus that education is a basic human right and a driver for the growth and development of individuals. For women, education is a shared tool of human agency and achievement for social justice, gender parity and sustainable development on a national scale, rather than just personal fulfilment. Despite great progress in the past century, there remain vast disparities in women's access to education across geographies, especially in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, and some regions of the Middle East. Cultures, especially with patriarchal expectations and social norms, limit women's educational aspirations well beyond their economic circumstances. This article reflects on the interconnectedness of the family and principles of society in supporting women's education, utilising a gendered lens to illustrate how personal choice and social norms intersect to act as either constraints or enablers of women's autonomy and empowerment. Gendered values are primarily embedded in family structures, as they are the primary unit of socialisation. Parents' choices about their daughter's education, their encouragement and their assigned household duties are significant precursors to women's educational pathways. Families who value girls' education tend to have aspirations beyond basic needs, have vast resource allocation, and practice equality. Conversely, families that do not support girls' education perpetuate cycles of dependency and illiteracy. Society also plays a role by providing the structural context that either maintains or disrupts normative patriarchal traditions or aspirations to create gender equality.

This study examines the collaborative efforts of society and the family in supporting women's education, drawing on historical experiences, international case studies, and policy frameworks. It talks about the role of reformers, the historical restrictions on women's

education, and current issues like early marriage, gender-based violence, and socioeconomic inequality. Examples from Bangladesh, Rwanda, India, and other places where family and social support have been essential in increasing girls' access to education are highlighted. In the end, the paper makes the case that although governments and international organisations can create programs, families' readiness to give their daughters' education top priority and societies' willingness to break down restrictive norms are crucial to the success of women's education. Promoting women's education necessitates a cooperative change in both macro-level social structures and micro-level family practices.

KEYWORDS: women's education, family, society, gender equality, empowerment, social development.

INTRODUCTION

Acquiring an education is foundational to human progress in terms of individual agency, economic progress, and democratic participation as evidenced in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and in particular, SDG4 (quality education) and SDG5 (gender equality), which highlight consensus on the value of women's education to development (UNESCO, 2022). Nonetheless, following decades of advocacy, gender inequities in access to education and educational outcomes remain significant. UNESCO (2021) reports 129 million girls worldwide are out of school, 32 million of which are primary age and 97 million of secondary age. The barriers faced by women are relational, not simply institutional. The family provides the first context in which gender norms are internalized and decisions about educational investments are made. Typically, parents and caregivers decide whether girls can go to school, how long they can remain in school, and whether they can transfer to upper levels of education. Society's broader cultural and structural context, legitimizing either patriarchal boundaries or progressive values, is also important. Social institutions, including religion, media, and policy frameworks—shape how families view education for women.

This article provides a critical examination of the family and societal roles involved in the education of women. It draws on several historical, sociological, and policy perspectives to illustrate a relation of micro-level family decisions coupled with macro-level social systems that constrain or allow educational access to women. In mapping collective practice and obstacles to women seeking an education, this article identifies the need for collective responsibility towards women's empowerment through education.

Historical Background of Women's Education

Women's Education in Ancient Civilizations

Throughout history, women's educational experiences have been both fostered and constrained. Women like Gargi and Maitreyi were educated in ideas of philosophy and scripture in ancient India during the Vedic period of 1500 to 500 BCE (Sharma, 2013). Women's education was supported as a vehicle for spiritual growth and intellectual engagement. In ancient Greece, elite women were educated in private settings but the vast majority of women were excluded from education (Pomeroy, 2002). In Confucian China, women's education grounded in Confucian ideals emphasized women's domestic roles while elite women gained literacy, particularly during the Tang dynasty (Li, 2017).

Decline and Restriction in the Medieval Period

As feudalism and patriarchy gained prominence, women's access to education virtually disappeared. During the medieval period in India, purdah and practices of child marriage inhibited women's intellectual development (Chakrabarti, 2018). In Europe, convents provided some women with literacy skills, although literacy remained confined to the boys' education system.

Colonial Period and Reform Movements

In the 19th century, the movement for women's education reemerged. In India, reformers including Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotirao Phule, and Savitribai Phule supported girls' education, oftentimes, in opposition to established norms (Forbes, 1996). Missionary schools also extended opportunities for women. In the West, the suffrage movement connected women's rights to education (Kelly, 2013).

Global Developments in the 20th Century

After World War II, women's placement in the territory of education attracted attention in development discourse. In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights indicated education as a right of all human beings, and UNESCO and UNICEF emphasized education for all and gender equality in education. Feminist movements built upon that expansion to the recognition of human rights & women's right to knowledge (Sen, 1999).

The Role of Family in Promoting Women's Education

Parental Attitudes and Aspirations

Parental perception of girls' education is frequently the most significant factor; families that view education as important for women's empowerment will encourage girls to pursue education, while those that have a different view see education as irrelevant as daughters are expected to marry soon (Nussbaum, 2000). Hannum and Buchmann (2005) found a strong association between maternal education and daughters' school enrolment.

Financial Investment and Resource Allocation

Economic factors often affect the accessibility of education. In households with limited resources, families often prioritize education for boys because the boys are perceived as eventual earners (King & Hill, 1993). Nevertheless, World Bank research in (2021) found that any additional year of school for a girl increased wages in the future by 10-20%, and that benefits the entire family.

Household Responsibilities and Time Poverty

Girls often shoulder disproportionate domestic labour—cooking, cleaning, and caregiving—which restricts study time (UNICEF, 2020). Families that redistribute household chores equitably create enabling environments for learning.

Encouragement, Mentorship, and Role Modelling

Parents and siblings serve as role models. For example, an educated older sister may encourage a younger sibling to stay in school (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006). Families that recognize educational accomplishments build self-esteem and aspirations.

Intergenerational Transmission

Education has ripple effects: mothers with education are more likely to educate their daughters. This intergenerational cycle highlights the importance of breaking initial barriers within families (Herz & Sperling, 2004).

The Role of Society in Promoting Women's Education

Cultural Norms and Gender Stereotypes

Societal expectations often limit women to their reproductive and domestic responsibilities. For example, the cultural practice of early marriage in South Asia is a major contributor to girls dropping out of school (Jha & Kelleher, 2006). In contrast, societies that recognize

women's contributions and role in development tend to have higher female literacy like those in Nordic countries (Kabeer, 2005).

Religion and Community Leadership

Role Models Religious institutions shape social attitudes. Progressive interpretations of religion have given legitimacy to women's education. For example, the Quran emphasizes literacy for both men and women, and reform-minded men in Muslim societies have used this to call out some of the more conservative approaches and restrictions imposed on women (Ahmed, 2002).

Media and Representation

Media can be a potent vehicle for altering perceptions. Campaigns like the Government of India's Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao use television, radio and digital media to promote the importance of educating girls (Government of India, 2020). Empowering images of educated women create positive deviations from stereotypes, which enhance girl branding and normalize girls' accomplishments.

Policy and Institutional Support

Policies reflect a society's collective conviction. Policies like free compulsory schooling laws, reservation schemes in higher education institutions, mid-day meal programs, and gender-sensitive infrastructure have illustrated a commitment to gender equity (Drèze & Sen, 2013). Countries like Bangladesh have even introduced stipends for girls in secondary education, leading to increases in enrollment (Khandker et al., 2003).

Barriers to Women's Education

Patriarchal norms: Within the family structure, societal norms may lead families to think that investing in girls' education is wasteful due to the temporary value of daughters as they typically "marry out" (King & Hill, 1993).

- Early marriage: UNICEF (2021) estimates that every year, 12 million girls get married before turning 18 which affects girls' long-term educational goals.
- Economic hardship: Parents will decide to send daughters to work instead of school due to poverty and economic hardship.
- Gender-based violence: Concerns for safety, exposure to harassment and lack of school facilities all will contribute to parents being less willing to send girls to schools (UNESCO, 2022).

- Cultural stigmas: Cultural stigma fosters an environment for women to strive for higher education or careers which keeps them in more traditional roles.

Case Studies

India: Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao

Initiated in 2015, this campaign combines family awareness, community mobilization, and state support. It responds to declining child sex ratios and promotes girls' education while trying to emphasize that family members and society educate girls together (Government of India, 2020).

Bangladesh: BRAC Schools

The BRAC model of community-based non-formal schools has a demonstrable impact in increasing literacy among rural girls, showing how society can take the lead when the state falls short (Nath, Sylva, & Grimes, 1999).

Rwanda: Post-Genocide Educational Reforms

In the aftermath of the genocide in 1994, Rwanda focused on gender equality in education as a pillar of national rebuilding. The stated policies for promoting equitable opportunities for learners in education and social norms later resulted in dramatically higher female enrollment rates (Sommer, 2010).

United States: Title IX

The Title IX legislation of 1972 prohibited gender discrimination in federally funded education, thus altering societal norms and family expectations in promoting women's education (Brake, 2010).

DISCUSSION

The evidence suggests that families and society are intertwined and mutually reinforcing systems. Families provide immediacy, primarily through emotional, financial, and aspirational support, while society provides norms and institutional frameworks that constrain or enable progress. Families can be supportive, but they encounter barriers when society is regressive, and progressive policies are ultimately limited without support from families. Therefore, promoting women's education requires a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach that incorporates both family change from the grass roots level and social reform at the collective level.

CONCLUSION

Education for women is a shared social responsibility that necessitates synergy between family and society. Families must prioritize the education of daughters, redistribute domestic workloads, and foster aspirations. Societies must challenge stereotypes, change regulations, and bring their institutions into action to create equality in access. Together, these entities can dismantle intergenerational cycles of inequality and promote inclusive growth and development. Promoting education for women is not simply about rights and justice; it is also pragmatism. Countries that invest in education for women and girls grow faster, have lower infant mortality rates, and stronger social cohesion (Sen, 1999). The challenge is not only about putting schools on the ground; it includes changing the mindset of families and the social structure, ultimately recognizing women as equal participants and leaders.

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