

Career Choices and Perceptions of Students at a Rural University for Women in North India

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ABSTRACT

The paper is an analysis of career perceptions of students studying in three different streams at a women's university in rural Haryana (India). Society in Haryana has a patriarchal social structure and gender inequalities are evident in most of the socio-cultural spheres. The ideas of educating women in such societies remain tied with processes of gender socialisation and prevailing ideological beliefs. Choices and perceptions of women students regarding career and professional orientation thus become markers of their identity negotiation processes through education. These processes in turn help to evaluate the relevance of education for addressing gender imbalances in such societies.

Keywords: Social structure, gender inequalities, educating women, women students, gender

Interviewer: *What made you decide in favour of Economics?*

Respondent: *It was someone here in the office sir. He told me that the University has started a new department and that it's good. I told my father and he said now this is our only option if one year has to be saved.*

Interviewer: *So it was just accidentally that you came to economics.*

Respondent: *Yes sir. I had never thought about it before.*

Interviewer: *Where would you have taken admission if not here?*

Respondent: *I wanted to join B.Com (Hons.) but could not get admission here.*

Interviewer: *Where else you had applied?*

Respondent: *Nowhere sir. My family people wanted me to study here only.*

Interviewer: *And what about you?*

Respondent: *(smiling helplessly) I have to follow their wish.*

The conversation above suggests how choices of discipline and career are shaped in rural Haryana. To say that higher education is gendered in nature is something well established by now in sociology of education and gender. There have been a number of studies on socialisation of students during schooling and higher education which in turn reproduces gender inequality in society. These realities are also related with the influence of market perceptions and the resultant categorisation of disciplines with a gendered outlook. The study investigates the nature of perceptions of women students regarding career, market and their negotiation with higher education as a result.

The field and setting

B.P.S. Women University was established in the year 2006 at village Khanpur Kalan (district Sonapat) of Haryana and from the start it has been grappling with issues which present an interesting interplay of tradition and modernity. It is named after an Arya Samajist saint Bhagat Phool Singh (who was earlier a Patwari) who established a Gurukul for women in 1936. The place flourished as a Kanya Gurukul with several institutions started over the years and finally was transformed into a full fledged University. The university has around 4000 students, 14 hostels and a campus spread over 400 acres. A large number of students come to the university from the surrounding villages and towns. Though the infrastructure and facilities are modern yet the context is rural and traditional. The researcher is a teacher of sociology at the university.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Karuna Chanana, the disciplinary choices of women are the focus of debate in the feminist discourse on education and gender. Much has been written on the patriarchal impact on these choices of women in higher education and also on the feminine and masculine dichotomy of disciplines. As masculinity and femininity are socially constructed, the underlying assumptions about subject or disciplinary choices have to be uncovered along with their close connection to gender roles and women's position in society. Chanana argues that one should try to understand why certain subjects become associated with women? Why is it considered more prestigious to pursue science and mathematics? Why science and mathematics are seen as being difficult? Moreover, certain subjects are considered masculine and therefore more men pursue these. The same is true for feminisation of certain disciplines (Chanana: 2007).

Further Karuna Chanana says that, the relationship between availability of disciplinary choices and women's ability to make them are not directly related nor are they necessarily dependent on women's academic achievement. In India, every year newspaper headlines highlight the better performance of girls at the school board examinations in different provinces. Yet when they join college, not necessarily they are able to pursue the subjects of their choice. Chanana also questions the implications of some emerging disciplinary choices for the participation of women in the job market. Disciplinary boundaries not only limit choices but are also dependent on the future options of 'life chances' of women. For

example despite the pursuit of higher education for young women being taken for granted nowadays among the upper and middle strata in the cities, it is still not viewed as an investment directly for their careers. For many an educational investment in case of a daughter is an option to fall back upon in case of her becoming a widow or being deserted. Chanana says that societal roles affect the aspirations of women.

For example, in a patriarchal society (as also in Haryana), parents are not expected to spend from the income of their daughters. Therefore, even educated daughters may not be encouraged to work and if they do so, it is for a somewhat short period before marriage. Further it is the right of the groom's family to decide whether she will work or not. Therefore, for a majority of young women higher education is not directly linked to careers. This is the reason for women to join arts and humanities as they are perceived to be cheaper, softer, and shorter than the professional courses. (Chanana 2007).

Sandra Acker in her book *Gendered Education* emphasizes upon studying educational aspirations of girls in sociological researches on education. She says that little is known about the ways through which experiences of education widen or narrow aspirations of girls. Girls' aspirations are influenced not only by sex but also by variables like region, ethnicity and type of institution in which they study. Cumulative disadvantages are faced by females who are from lower classes, rural and non-academic, says Acker. (Acker 1994)

According to Gita Nambissan "curricular choices are made after secondary school, girls tend to cluster in what are perceived as the more 'feminine' arts and humanities courses, while a relatively larger proportion of boys are found in 'career oriented' science, commerce and, more recently, computer courses. These subject choices reflect gender inequality in education and constrain future options and life chances of girls. Why do a large majority of girls opt out of science and show a disinclination for mathematics? Some scholars foreground gender socialization and the lesser exposure of girls to games and experiences that develop abilities (spatial, abstract thinking) and interests that orient them towards science and mathematics as compared to boys. Subject choices are also partly influenced by parental concern that daughters do not jeopardize their chances for a 'successful' marriage by aspiring to non-conventional careers that interfere with familial responsibilities and expectations" (Nambissan: 2004).

Prem Chowdhry in her book 'The Veiled Women' writes about the deeply ingrained patriarchal ideology in people's perceptions about female education in Haryana. Education is seen to destroy the capacity for doing domestic work in women. Chowdhry says that preference is usually given to boys when it comes to education. The desire to study on part of some of the girls of school going age does not seem to find much response among many of the parents. She writes "among those who can afford it, I discovered a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards education. For them, sending the girls to school till class eight or middle or even matric is not unusual.

Also the generally voiced opinion among them is that after marriage the educated girl can supervise at least the early education of the family children... It is not unusual to see a girl of seven or eight rearing the younger children". (Chowdhry 1994)

Research questions

The study posed following research questions:

1. How do students perceive their career choices, scope in the market and the disciplines they have joined?
2. How is the University education shaping career aspirations of women students?

METHODOLOGY

The study followed qualitative approach based on a constructivist paradigm which asserts that knowledge is symbolically constructed. The underlying assumption here is that individuals seek an understanding of the world in which they live their lives and develop subjective meanings of their experiences. These meanings are directed toward certain objects or things and are varied and multiple. They lead the researcher to look for complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories. Thus the goal of research is to build upon participants' views of the situation being studied as much as possible.

The ontological standpoint of the constructivist approach presupposes a world in which absolute reality is not knowable and thus the research focuses on individual perspectives and constructions of reality. Reality is studied in the form of abstract mental constructions which are experientially formed in a local and specific manner. Seen from an epistemological angle the individual constructions of reality provide the knowledge of interest to the researcher. Researchers and participants in the study are thus joined together in the process of co-construction. In this perspective it is not only impossible but undesirable for the researchers to be distant and objective. (Hatch 2002)

The research was conducted with interview as a tool to collect data regarding perceptions of students and teachers. Perception, in the first instance is necessarily personal and subjective. Further it is naïve in the sense that its own premises are not ordinarily subjected to critical appraisal. Yet everyday social practice rests significantly on agreement between different persons over what the phenomenon at issue really are and such an agreement also defines the situation collectively. Perception and construction are thus successive moments in the social dialectic (Saberwal 2004).

The study used interview as a method and a sample of 30 students (10 each from three streams) from economics, natural sciences and law was taken. All the students were from first year in their respective courses. All the students belonged to a middle class background. The interviews were largely unstructured.

Findings and interpretations

The study was aimed at understanding the perceptions of students regarding career choice and market trends. As the theoretical formulations of the authors in literature review suggested girls, especially in Haryana, are conventionally not career oriented and their education is more in line with the patriarchal values than principles of individualism and gender equality. This is bound to affect their perceptions

of their education process especially its relation with what they can do in later life in terms of career or otherwise.

The interviews of the Economics students revealed that only half of the students initially wanted to join the course. Most of them had desired to take admission in the B.Com (Hons) course but as they could not manage a seat there, the option of Economics was utilized by them to save one year from going waste. The students informed me that they were not on the lookout of any other place or institution for taking admission and thus they had applied only at B.P.S. Women University. The reason for choosing the institution was the trust of their parents in the safe environment of the University as it happens to be a women's university.

A law student narrated an incident when I was discussing the reason for choosing the university with her. She told me that one day two men were enquiring about the treatment of girls in the University when she passed by. When they asked her too she got to know that actually they wanted to get their own daughters admitted in some course at the University. She informed them that the university has a very tight security in terms of access of girls to the outside world and that if they want their daughters' personality to develop faster, they should find a place where restrictions would be lesser. However she was surprised when they became extremely happy to know all this and their spontaneous reaction was that they want such an institution only for their daughters and would definitely get them admitted at this very university after knowing this.

The reason for choosing the university as the only destination for the education by the parents leads to a sense of finality in perceptions regarding career in these women students as they see no point in pursuing what they really wish to do. Students of Economics do wish to work after completing their degree which is five years integrated M.A. course. However, they are not sure if it can be something other than a teaching job. Thus six out of ten students told me that they envision a career in teaching while one student (belonging to SC category) was contemplating to leave the course. She said that she had joined this course only as her father had wished so. Now that her father is had passed away due to some illness, she sees no point in continuing with something which seems extremely tough to her. *'I can't understand a thing....the syllabus is very difficult and all books are heavy for me'*, were her words about the course in Economics. When asked about which course she would like to join, she replied that perhaps B.A. would be her choice.

When asked about what kind of jobs are available to economics degree holders, a couple of students said that they perhaps had scope in banks. I asked them whether students of MBA get a job faster than them as their course is more in demand in corporate firms. To this students replied in the affirmative. Thus economics in their opinion is not a very market- friendly course. However all the students wanted to gain English speaking skills as they feel that it is crucial in the job market. Most of them are not aware of research institutions which offer jobs to social science post graduates.

It was evident during my interviews with the science students that most of these girls have been socialised in patriarchal values which require them to be family oriented, obedient and non-rebellious. They find it justified that they have been admitted in a women's university and not a co-educational institution.

They have had their schooling from schools located in village and town. They have aspirations to be successful but are not sure whether they will be able to attain what they have in mind regarding career. They do know that it is a competitive world. Most of them now plan to be lecturers, though are without a definite plan to achieve their goals. Almost all of them wanted to be engineers but had to be contented with joining B.Sc. in a women's University. In some cases their brothers went for coaching for competitive exams of engineering to reputed centres in places like Kota (in Rajasthan) and Delhi. They do not believe that they can freely take their own decisions in life regarding what they wish to do in future. Their awareness regarding research scientist jobs is again close to being ignorant. However, they have also not explored these options as they know that their parents will not allow them to go to metropolitan centres or far distant places (even in India) for work. Once again I saw the feeling of finality governing the lives of these students too as they know that all their decisions have to be taken by family members and in accordance with their prospects for marriage.

Only one student in B.Sc. had somewhat different ideas than other girls. She had been educated at a city in Uttar Pradesh at a Kendriya Vidyalaya. She said that though she wanted to be an engineer but she could not clear entrance examination for the same. Now her desire is to join the army. She said that she is not at all comfortable as students at the university have very rigid beliefs. She also believes that her degree will not be of much use in her career as she is not gaining real knowledge through it.

The students of the Law department were the most expressive. Two of the students I interviewed told me that they wanted to be fashion designers but had to join the law course as their parents so desired. They now see their career options in terms of being a 'legal advisor' or a judge. None of them wants to join teaching. One student said she aspires to be an IAS officer as her father wants the same. She said that only because her sister was joining B.A.LL.B she too had to join sacrificing her wish to be a fashion designer. When I asked the students what do they understand by the term legal advisor, they replied that their seniors had told them about it and perhaps it means a lawyer working for a company. When asked about NGOs and scope of law graduates in this sector, only three students said they would like to be a part of social service initiatives but not as a full time activist. The others said that they were not much aware of this possibility and maybe if they do not succeed in qualifying judiciary exams or in having a good practice, they could join the NGO sector too.

Law students told me that usually a belief is associated with them at home and that is that they speak too much. This is also one of the reasons that they are doing law. I found out that someone close to them in the family or relatives is a lawyer. The students of law also seemed to be the most expressive ones about their ambitions of doing something of great importance in life. In other words the need for achievement was very prominently present in them. However they are not able to see much beyond the competitive examination for entry to judiciary.

In the final analysis one could say that students at the University have a seemingly passive orientation towards having a career. This is a result of their gender socialisation. However they have dreams but whether these will turn into aims is dependent upon family support. Family is extremely important for these students and it seems even the University is an extension of family for them. They want to have

teachers who will understand them (like parents). The impact of patriarchal ideology is clearly visible on their beliefs (and self concept) as being obedient, not making one's own choices and having a good image are traits which seem desirable and highly valuable to them. They do understand that times are changing and world is becoming highly competitive. They know English and communicative skills matter in job market. They have a desire to have a dynamic personality. However, all this also needs to fit with the demands of family and societal expectations form them. Their negotiation with academic world and University education is mediated by this ideological indoctrination.

Reflections on the research process and role of the researcher

While conducting the interviews I was confronted with several challenges. First of all in establishing rapport, I had to move out of my image of a teacher. I had to make the students comfortable as they would not open up in sharing their views especially with regard to what constitutes a teacher's performance. I was actually using the principle of 'empathy' and conveyed this to the students that the whole exercise was aimed at understanding their perceptions and views for the purpose of research. It was a challenge to make students feel confident and gain their trust. I also used various techniques I have found useful in this exercise as a teacher over the years like taking names of students as often as possible. Here probably my role of a researcher got facilitated by my experience (and perhaps even identity) as a teacher. I was extremely conscious of the possible adverse impact of 'power' and 'expertise' on the process of interview. A teacher is seen as having 'power' and 'expertise' by the students. In fact the students were actually influenced by these categories as they sought my advice on coping with the challenges they face in their academic life. They wanted this advice for improving their personality and communicative skills as well as their competencies in the English language. I had to explain to the students that I was only conducting their interview for the purpose of research as of now but as a teacher I would be available to them for taking advice and help in the process of their academic growth after the interview sessions were over.

Whenever the students did not open up in the beginning I also wondered at times whether my research itself is gendered in nature and whether the results would have been different if a woman researcher had conducted this research. At times I wanted to change my identity to that of a teacher during the interview but restricted myself from doing so. However I used these moments to pose different questions to students as well as to myself so as to arrive at different versions of an issue and advance my analysis. At every moment during the course of the research this reflexivity helped me in keeping focussed and yet being diverse.

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