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## The paradox of progress: Female literacy, educational attainment, and enduring gender disparities in India

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### Abstract

This paper examines the paradoxical coexistence of significant improvements in female literacy and educational enrolment in India with the persistence of deep-rooted gender disparities, particularly in economic participation and autonomy. Despite unprecedented gains—with female literacy rising from 53.67% (2001) to 70.3% (2022) and women's gross enrolment in higher education now surpassing men's—female labor force participation has stagnated and even declined, falling to 24.5% (PLFS, 2022-23). Through a qualitative, theoretical analysis synthesizing existing literature and secondary data, this study argues that educational advancement is a necessary but insufficient condition for empowerment. The paradox is explained by a complex web of mediating factors: the operation of education as symbolic capital enhancing marriageability rather than economic agency; a lack of “suitable” job opportunities in a segmented labor market; the overwhelming burden of unpaid care work; and the persistence of patriarchal social norms that trigger a backlash against women's potential economic independence. The paper concludes that transforming educational gains into genuine empowerment requires moving beyond a focus on quantitative enrollment to a concerted effort aimed at dismantling structural barriers through integrated policy interventions in the economy, social infrastructure, and the education system itself.

**Keywords:** Gender paradox, female education, female labor force participation, India, unpaid care work, patriarchal norms, economic development, women's empowerment

### 1. Introduction

The pursuit of gender equality is a central tenet of modern development paradigms, with female education widely championed as its most potent catalyst. The theoretical linkage is compelling: educating girls increases their human capital, delays marriage, improves health outcomes, and theoretically integrates them into the formal economy, thereby catalyzing a transformative cycle of empowerment, economic growth, and social progress (World Bank, 2023) <sup>[18]</sup>. In India, this belief has been operationalized through decades of targeted policy initiatives, from the National Policy on Education (1986) to the landmark Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009) and the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter) campaign. The statistical outcomes of these efforts are, on the surface, remarkably positive. India's female literacy rate has surged from a mere 8.86% in 1951 to 70.3% in 2022 (Ministry of Education, 2022) <sup>[13]</sup>. Furthermore, the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) for girls in higher education has now reached 93.4%, surpassing that of boys (91.3%) (AISHE, 2022). These figures suggest a nation steadily dismantling historical barriers to female education.

However, a deeper interrogation of India's socio-economic landscape reveals a troubling and counterintuitive disconnect. These significant gains in educational attainment have not precipitated a commensurate erosion of deep-seated gender inequalities. Instead, a paradoxical reality has emerged: an increasingly educated female population coexists with persistently low and even declining female labor force participation (FLFP), stagnant political representation, and enduring socio-cultural constraints. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS, 2022-23) <sup>[15]</sup>, the female labor force participation rate for women aged 15 and above stands at 24.5%, a figure that remains among the lowest globally despite the educational surge. This decline is particularly pronounced among urban, educated young women (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[3]</sup>.

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Simultaneously, women hold only about 15% of seats in the Lok Sabha (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024) <sup>[8]</sup> and continue to face alarming rates of gender-biased violence and son-preference, as evidenced in the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5, 2019-21) <sup>[14]</sup>.

This dissonance between the metric of educational progress and the reality of lived experience forms the core of what this paper terms "The Paradox of Progress." It poses a critical question: why has the substantial investment in female literacy and schooling failed to act as a reliable lever for broader gender empowerment in the Indian context? This introduction establishes the foundation for investigating this complex puzzle. It argues that the translation of educational gains into tangible empowerment is not automatic but is critically mediated by a web of structural, economic, and patriarchal constraints. This paper will explore the hypothesis that factors such as the lack of "suitable" job opportunities, the overwhelming burden of unpaid care work, deeply entrenched social norms regarding women's roles, and the variable quality of education itself effectively suppress the potential of female education to act as a transformative force. By examining this paradox, this study aims to move beyond a celebratory narrative of educational statistics to a more nuanced understanding of the conditions required to convert capabilities into genuine agency for women in India.

## 2. Literature Review

The paradoxical coexistence of rising female educational attainment with persistent gender disparities in India has been extensively examined through various academic lenses. The existing literature provides a multi-faceted explanation, moving beyond simplistic human capital models to incorporate socio-cultural, economic, and structural factors that mediate the relationship between education and empowerment.

The theoretical foundation often begins with Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1965) <sup>[1]</sup>, which posits that investments in education and skills (human capital) yield increased productivity and higher economic returns in the labor market. From this perspective, the rise in female education should logically lead to a surge in female labor force participation (FLFP) and earnings. However, empirical evidence from India starkly contradicts this linear prediction. Feminist economists and sociologists have compellingly argued that the operation of human capital theory is contingent on social context. Drèze and Sen (2002) <sup>[5]</sup> famously highlighted the critical role of women's agency, noting that educational gains may not translate into employment if social norms restrict women's freedom to participate in the public sphere. Klasen and Pieters (2015) <sup>[10]</sup> empirically demonstrated that the decline in FLFP is concentrated among urban, educated women, precisely the group that should benefit most according to standard theory. This is often explained through the concept of "patriarchal bargains" (Kandiyoti, 1988) <sup>[9]</sup>, where women adhere to restrictive norms in exchange for security and status. In the Indian context, female education can become a form of symbolic capital, enhancing a family's social status and a woman's marriageability rather than signaling her preparedness for economic productivity (Lukose, 2005) <sup>[12]</sup>. A prominent economic framework used to understand this phenomenon is the U-Shaped Female Labor Force Participation Hypothesis. This model suggests that as

economies develop, FLFP first declines as families withdraw women from arduous agricultural labor (an income effect) and then rises again with the creation of white-collar, service-sector jobs that are more socially acceptable for educated women (a substitution effect). A significant body of literature positions India as being stuck in the trough of this U-curve (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2020; Lahoti & Swaminathan, 2016) <sup>[3, 11]</sup>. The structural transformation of the economy has failed to generate a sufficient number of formal, salaried jobs for women at a pace that matches the growth in their educational attainment. This results in educated women preferring to wait for "good" jobs rather than engaging in informal or agricultural work, often leading to their statistical disappearance from the labor force.

This directly relates to the literature on Job Market Mismatch and Safety Concerns. Scholars argue that the problem is not a lack of jobs per se, but a critical shortage of jobs deemed "suitable" for women from middle-class families. These are typically characterized by safety, social acceptability, and flexibility (Fletcher, Pande, & Moore, 2017) <sup>[6]</sup>. Research by Chakraborty *et al.* (2018) <sup>[2]</sup> and others has consistently shown that the threat of sexual harassment in public spaces and workplaces, combined with a lack of safe and reliable transportation, acts as a powerful deterrent, effectively shrinking the geographic radius of job opportunities available to women. This demand-side constraint means that even highly educated women are often confined to a narrow set of "feminized" sectors like education and healthcare.

Furthermore, critics point to the Quality of Education and Vocational Training as a limiting factor. Ramachandran (2020) <sup>[16]</sup> and others argue that the Indian education system's overwhelming focus on quantitative expansion and rote learning has come at the expense of quality and transformative potential. The curriculum and pedagogy often unconsciously reinforce traditional gender stereotypes rather than challenging them. Moreover, the system frequently fails to equip girls with the critical thinking, digital literacy, vocational skills, and career confidence necessary to navigate a competitive and often biased labor market (Subrahmanian, 2005) <sup>[17]</sup>. This results in a credentials-rich but skills-poor cohort of female graduates.

Finally, a substantial and cross-disciplinary body of work emphasizes the fundamental constraint of the "Unpaid Care Work" Burden. Hirway (2015) <sup>[7]</sup> and other feminist economists have rigorously documented that women in India, including the educated, continue to bear a disproportionate and unrecognized burden of domestic chores and caregiving for children and the elderly. Time-use surveys reveal that this unpaid work consumes a vast portion of women's time, leaving them with limited hours for paid employment, skill development, or leisure. This unequal distribution of domestic labor within households, largely unaffected by a woman's educational level, creates a "time poverty" that severely limits her ability to participate in the economy even when opportunities exist (Desai & Joshi, 2019) <sup>[4]</sup>.

In summary, the literature moves beyond a singular explanation, instead presenting a confluence of factors: social norms that limit agency, an economy that fails to create appropriate jobs, safety concerns that restrict mobility, an education system that lacks transformative quality, and the pervasive burden of unpaid care work.

Together, these factors create a robust web of constraints that explain the paradoxical disconnect between education and empowerment in India.

### 3. Objectives

This research paper aims to:

1. To document and analyze the trends in female literacy and educational attainment in India from 1990 to the present.
2. To juxtapose these educational gains with trends in key indicators of gender disparity, specifically female labor force participation, wage gaps, political representation, and health outcomes.
3. To identify and analyze the primary socio-economic, cultural, and structural factors that create the disconnect between educational attainment and broader empowerment.
4. To provide policy-relevant recommendations for bridging this gap and ensuring that education translates into tangible empowerment.

### 4. Research Methodology

Given the conceptual and theoretical nature of this inquiry into the paradox of female education and enduring gender disparities, this study will employ a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical research design. The methodology will forego statistical and primary data analysis in favor of a comprehensive synthesis and critical analysis of existing literature, policy documents, and theoretical frameworks. This approach is chosen to delve deeply into the socio-cultural, economic, and structural explanations for the observed phenomenon, providing a rich, narrative understanding of the underlying causes.

#### 4.1. Research Design

This study is designed as a systematic literature review and theoretical analysis. It aims to synthesize, evaluate, and interpret a body of scholarly work to construct a coherent explanation for the research problem. The design is non-empirical and focuses on constructing a logical argument based on existing evidence and theories.

#### 4.2. Data Collection: Sources and Materials

Since no new primary or statistical data will be generated or analyzed, the "data" for this study consists exclusively of existing qualitative and theoretical sources. The research will be conducted through a thorough review of the following materials:

- **Academic Literature:** Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and book chapters from leading scholars in the fields of gender studies, development economics, sociology, and education policy. Key theoretical frameworks to be examined include:
  - a) Feminist critiques of human capital theory (e.g., Dreze & Sen, 2002) <sup>[5]</sup>.
  - b) Concepts of "patriarchal bargains" and social reproduction (e.g., Kandiyoti, 1988) <sup>[9]</sup>.
  - c) Analyses of the care economy and unpaid labor (e.g., Hirway, 2015) <sup>[7]</sup>.
  - d) Critical studies on the quality and ideology of education systems (e.g., Ramachandran, 2020) <sup>[16]</sup>.
- **Government and NGO Reports:** Documents from Indian ministries (e.g., Education, Women and Child

Development), the World Bank, UNESCO, and NGOs like PRS Legislative Research and Centre for Budget and Policy Studies will be used to understand policy landscapes and access qualitative analyses of trends.

- **National Survey Frameworks:** While the quantitative data from surveys like the NFHS, NSSO, and PLFS will not be statistically analyzed, their published reports, summary findings, and official commentaries will be used to establish the factual premise of the paradox and to support qualitative observations about trends.
- **Media and Case Studies:** Reputable journalistic investigations and published case studies will be consulted to provide anecdotal and narrative evidence that illustrates the theoretical arguments being made (e.g., profiles of educated women who have left the workforce).

#### 4.3. Data Analysis Method

The analysis will consist of a thematic and critical content analysis of the collected materials. This involves:

1. **Systematic Sourcing:** Identifying and gathering relevant literature and documents through academic databases and institutional websites using keywords such as "female education India," "gender paradox," "women's employment India," "patriarchy and education," etc.
2. **Critical Reading and Thematic Coding:** Reading the selected texts critically to identify recurring themes, central arguments, points of consensus, and debates among scholars. Key themes anticipated include social norms, job market failure, care work, and education quality.
3. **Synthesis and Interpretation:** Weaving together the insights from various sources to build a coherent and multi-faceted argument. This involves comparing different theoretical perspectives, evaluating the strength of their explanations, and identifying how they interact to create the overall paradox.
4. **Narrative Construction:** Organizing the synthesized themes into a logical narrative structure that effectively explains why educational gains have not led to proportional empowerment. The analysis will focus on the "why" and "how," using qualitative evidence from the literature to support each point.

In essence, this methodology is a rigorous exercise in scholarly synthesis, aiming to provide a deep and nuanced theoretical explanation for one of India's most pressing gender dilemmas.

### 5. Findings

This study's investigation into the paradox of female education in India yields a multi-faceted set of findings, synthesizing data from national surveys and reports to paint a comprehensive picture of the disconnect between educational attainment and socio-economic empowerment.

#### 5.1. The Educational Ascent: Unprecedented Quantitative Progress

The data unequivocally confirms a dramatic improvement in female access to education. The female literacy rate (for women aged 7 and above) rose from 53.67% in 2001 to 70.3% in 2022 (Ministry of Education, 2022) <sup>[13]</sup>. This progress is even more pronounced in higher education. The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) for females in higher



education reached 93.4% in 2021-22, surpassing the male GER of 91.3% (AISHE, 2022). Certain states, like Kerala (99.5%) and Tamil Nadu (98.3%), have achieved near-universal female enrollment in higher education, demonstrating the success of targeted policy initiatives.

### 5.2. The Core Paradox: Stagnation and Decline in Economic Participation

Despite this educational boom, female economic participation tells a different story. The Female Labor Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) for women aged 15 and above has remained among the lowest in the world. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS, 2022-23) <sup>[15]</sup>, the FLFPR stands at 24.5% in rural areas and 20.9% in urban areas. Most strikingly, this represents a significant decline from previous decades; for instance, the NSSO (2011-12) reported a FLFPR of 31.2% for the same age group. This decline is most acute among young, urban, and educated women, directly contradicting human capital predictions.

### 5.3. The Unpaid Care Burden: A Primary Constraint

Data from the Time Use Survey (2019) provides a critical explanation for the decline in female labor force participation, highlighting the immense and disproportionate burden of unpaid care work shouldered by women. The survey reveals that on average, women spend 5.5 hours per day on unpaid domestic and care work, in stark contrast to the mere 1.5 hours spent by men. This burden is even more pronounced for rural women, whose daily unpaid work rises to 6.1 hours. Crucially, this disproportionate allocation of domestic labor is largely unaffected by educational attainment, creating a fundamental and often insurmountable barrier for educated women seeking to enter or remain in the paid workforce. The time-consuming nature of this unpaid work effectively erases the potential economic gains from their education, as the demands of the household severely restrict their availability for formal employment, skill development, or occupational mobility. This persistent inequity in the division of labor within the home acts as a powerful structural constraint, nullifying the liberating potential of educational advancement.

### 5.4. Regional Disparities: Highlighting the Role of Social Norms

A comparative analysis of Indian states underscores that educational attainment is not the sole determinant of female

labor force participation, with regional variations revealing the critical role of underlying social and developmental factors. States like Kerala and Tamil Nadu, which have historically invested in broader social development and exhibit relatively more progressive gender norms, demonstrate a moderated version of the paradox. Kerala, despite boasting a near-universal female literacy rate of 99.3% (NFHS-5), has a FLFPR of only 31.4% (PLFS 2022-23) <sup>[15]</sup>. Similarly, Tamil Nadu, with a female literacy rate of 90.3%, reports a FLFPR of 45.8%. Conversely, states with lower literacy rates and stronger patriarchal structures show an even more acute disconnect. Bihar, with a female literacy rate of 69.5%, has a strikingly low FLFPR of 7.5%. Uttar Pradesh presents a telling urban-rural divide: with a literacy rate of 70.4%, its FLFPR is 26.5% for rural women—who often engage in agricultural work out of economic necessity—but plummets to just 11.8% for urban women, for whom social restrictions and the lack of "suitable" jobs are more pronounced. This sharp variation suggests that while education is a necessary foundation, it is the broader ecosystem—comprising social norms, the structure of economic opportunities, and a history of gender-progressive policies—that ultimately determines whether educational gains can be translated into economic empowerment.

### 5.5. Sectoral Segmentation and the "Suitable Job" Myth

The distribution of working women reveals severe market segmentation. Over 75% of employed, educated women are concentrated in just three sectors: education, health, and low-skilled public administration (PLFS, 2022-23) <sup>[15]</sup>. This clustering indicates a severe demand-side problem where the economy is not generating enough "respectable" and safe jobs that align with the aspirations and social constraints of educated women and their families.

### 5.6. The Persistence of Restricted Autonomy

Educational gains have failed to dismantle deep-seated norms governing female autonomy. NFHS-5 (2019-21) <sup>[14]</sup> data shows that 41% of women still need permission to visit a health clinic. Further, only 54.4% of women participate in decisions about their own health care, and a mere 31.6% have any say in how their own cash earnings are spent. This demonstrates that education has not automatically translated into greater agency within the household, a cornerstone of true empowerment.

**Table 1:** Summary of Key Paradoxical Indicators

Indicator	Metric & Source	Finding	Paradoxical Insight
Higher Education	GER: 93.4% (AISHE, 2022)	Women outpace men in enrollment.	Educational access is no longer the primary barrier.
Labor Force Participation	FLFPR: 24.5% (PLFS, 2022-23) <sup>[15]</sup>	Low and declining from 31.2% (2011-12).	Education does not guarantee economic participation.
Unpaid Work Burden	Avg. 5.5 hrs/day vs. 1.5 hrs for men (Time Use Survey, 2019)	Massive gender gap in domestic labor.	Educated women remain primary caregivers, limiting time for paid work.
Decision-Making Power	Only 31.6% control their earnings (NFHS-5)	Low autonomy over personal finances.	Education has not fundamentally shifted intra-household power dynamics.

In conclusion, the findings present a clear and evidence-based paradox: India has successfully created a generation of educated women but has concurrently failed to create the social, economic, and structural conditions necessary for them to convert that education into broad-based economic agency and personal autonomy. The promise of education as a great equalizer remains largely unfulfilled.

## 6. Discussion

The findings presented in Section 5 paint a clear and statistically supported picture of India's gender paradox. This discussion section moves beyond *what* the data shows to interrogate *why* these contradictory trends coexist. The analysis posits that the transformative potential of female education is being systematically suppressed by a powerful

confluence of socio-cultural, economic, and structural factors.

### **6.1. Education as Symbolic Capital: The Credential vs. the Capability**

The first layer of explanation lies in reinterpreting the value of education itself. While human capital theory views education as an investment for economic productivity, in many Indian contexts, it operates primarily as a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). A woman's degree often functions less as a toolkit for career building and more as a status symbol that enhances her family's social standing and, crucially, her marriageability in a competitive matrimonial market. In this framework, education becomes a "new dowry," a credential that signals a woman's suitability for a high-status alliance but does not necessitate its use for income generation (Lukose, 2005) [12]. This explains why families invest in daughters' education even while opposing their careers; the payoff is social, not economic. The low FLFPR among the highly educated, particularly in urban areas, is a direct outcome of this repurposing of education away from empowerment and towards the reinforcement of traditional social hierarchies.

### **6.2. The Structural Mismatch: An Economy That Doesn't Demand Educated Women**

The second critical factor is a fundamental failure on the demand side of the labor equation. The structure of India's economic growth has failed to generate a massive number of "good jobs"—formal, secure, and socially legitimate occupations—that educated women both seek and are permitted to take. As Klasen and Pieters (2015) [10] argue, India appears trapped in the trough of the U-shaped curve. Economic growth has been concentrated in capital-intensive industries (e.g., refining, IT services) that employ relatively few people, and low-value, informal service sector work. The "missing middle" of labor-intensive manufacturing and high-employment service sectors (e.g., garment production, curated food processing, organized retail) has never fully materialized. This leaves a cohort of educated women facing a choice between undesirable informal manual labor and a scarce number of coveted formal jobs in teaching or government. For many, withdrawal from the labor force becomes the only respectable option.

### **6.3. Patriarchal Backlash: The Threat of Female Empowerment**

A more insidious explanation is the phenomenon of patriarchal backlash. Kandiyoti's (1988) [9] concept of "patriarchal bargains" is crucial here. As women become more educated and potentially economically independent, they pose a threat to established patriarchal authority structures within families and communities. This can trigger a counter-reaction where families, to reassert control and protect "family honor" (izzat), impose stricter social controls on women's mobility and autonomy. This manifests in practices like restricting their ability to travel for work, scrutinizing their workplace interactions, and pressuring them to prioritize domestic roles. Thus, education can inadvertently lead to greater surveillance and restriction, a backlash designed to ensure that a woman's enhanced capabilities do not disrupt the traditional gender order.

### **6.4. The Invisible Cage of Unpaid Care Work**

The quantitative data on time use provides perhaps the most tangible barrier. Feminist economists have long argued that

the market economy is subsidized by the unpaid reproductive labor of women (Hirway, 2015) [7]. The findings confirm that even educated Indian women remain overwhelmingly responsible for the "second shift" of domestic and care work. The absence of affordable, quality childcare, the lack of paid parental leave for men that would encourage shared responsibility, and the deeply internalized gender roles that exempt men from domestic duties create an insurmountable time-poverty for women. An educated woman may aspire to a career, but the physical and mental load of managing a household single-handedly makes sustained, productive paid work nearly impossible. This unequal distribution of labor within the home acts as a powerful structural veto on female employment.

### **6.5. The Quality of Education: A System That Obeys Rather than Challenges**

Finally, the analysis must turn inward to the education system itself. The Indian pedagogical model, heavily focused on rote learning and examination success, is largely designed for compliance rather than critical thinking (Ramachandran, 2020) [16]. It does not systematically equip girls with the skills—negotiation, financial literacy, assertiveness, digital fluency—to navigate a biased labor market. Furthermore, the curriculum and textbooks often unconsciously reinforce gender stereotypes rather than challenging them. An education that teaches a girl to be a diligent student but not a critical citizen or a confident job-seeker is an incomplete education. It produces graduates who are literate and credentialed but may lack the agency and counter-hegemonic mind set required to defy social norms and claim their place in the economy.

In conclusion, the paradox is not a mystery but a logical outcome of these intersecting forces. Educational progress is happening in a vacuum, disconnected from the necessary evolution in economic policy, social norms, and domestic equity. Until these deeper structural barriers are addressed, the promise of education as a great liberator for Indian women will remain

## **7. Conclusion**

This paper has interrogated one of the most pressing and paradoxical issues in contemporary Indian development: the stark disconnect between significant gains in female literacy and educational attainment and the persistent stagnation in women's economic participation and broader social empowerment. The analysis confirms that the rise in female education is an undeniable and hard-won achievement, reflecting decades of policy effort and social change. However, it concludes that this progress represents an incomplete revolution. Educational attainment, while necessary, is profoundly insufficient as a standalone catalyst for gender equality.

The core argument of this paper is that the paradox exists because educational advances are occurring within a socio-economic ecosystem that remains largely hostile to female autonomy. The potential for empowerment is neutralized by a powerful confluence of factors: patriarchal social norms that repurpose education into symbolic capital for marriageability rather than economic agency; a segmented and underperforming labor market that fails to create a sufficient number of secure and "socially acceptable" jobs for educated women; the crushing and unequal burden of unpaid care work that confines women to the domestic

sphere; an education system that prioritizes rote learning over critical thinking and empowerment; and the persistent threat of a patriarchal backlash that seeks to control women's newfound capabilities.

Therefore, the transformation of educational gains into genuine empowerment requires a fundamental strategic shift. Moving forward necessitates moving beyond a narrow focus on enrollment numbers and literacy rates. It demands a concerted, multi-pronged attack on the deep-rooted structural barriers that continue to lock women out of the economy and public life. This entails:

1. **Economic and Industrial Policy** that actively incentivizes job creation in sectors suitable for female graduates and promotes entrepreneurship.
2. **Social Policy** that directly addresses the unequal distribution of domestic labor through affordable childcare, shared parental leave, and public campaigns targeting men and boys.
3. **Educational Reform** that transforms curricula and pedagogy to be gender-sensitive, foster critical thinking, and develop practical skills for the modern economy.
4. **Urban and Infrastructure Policy** that prioritizes women's safety and mobility through reliable public transportation and safer public spaces.

In essence, the task ahead is not merely to educate girls but to dismantle the entrenched systems that prevent them from using that education. The promise of India's demographic dividend and its aspirations for inclusive growth hinge on its ability to convert the capabilities of its educated women into tangible agency, ensuring that the classroom truly becomes a pathway to liberation, not just a new site of confinement.

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