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## Access, equity and structural reforms: Feminist discourses on women in higher education in India

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### Abstract

Neoliberal reforms have reshaped the governance of education worldwide, reducing the role of the state and privileging market-oriented approaches. In India, while elementary education has been safeguarded as a state responsibility, higher education has become increasingly privatized, elitist, and accessible primarily to those with economic, academic, and social capital. This paper examines how neoliberal restructuring since the 1990s has impacted gender equity in higher education, particularly in terms of access, participation, and discipline choice. Despite significant increases in women's enrollment globally and nationally, gendered patterns of participation persist. Women remain concentrated in less market-driven fields, while structural barriers including patriarchal norms, cultural stereotypes, economic burdens, and the competing demands of higher education and marriage continue to restrict their opportunities. Neoliberal reforms, by transforming education into a commodity, further disadvantage women from marginalized caste and class backgrounds, reproducing systemic inequalities. Middle-class families often deploy higher education as cultural capital, even mobilizing it as "educational dowry," reinforcing gendered expectations rather than dismantling them. The paper employs feminist theoretical perspectives—liberal, socialist, radical, and postmodern to analyze these dynamics. Liberal feminism emphasizes equal opportunity, socialist feminism situates inequalities within capitalist structures, radical feminism highlights patriarchal control over knowledge and discipline choices, and postmodernist strands underline the differentiated effects of globalization and neoliberalism across women's diverse social locations. The paper concludes that neoliberal reforms have intensified rather than reduced gender disparities in higher education. Addressing these inequities requires treating education as a public good while engaging critically with feminist theories that reveal both structural barriers and the multiplicity of women's experiences.

**Keywords:** Neoliberal reforms, higher education, gender equity, women's participation, feminist theory

### Introduction

The neo-liberal philosophy of the contemporary societies have altered the very way we look at the economic, political, social and policy domains of modern democratic governance. The role of the state has become weaker and the market and the non-state business sector is grabbing the space left by the weakening of the state in recent times in many developing societies including India. Not only the market aspiring to take over the reigns of the state by brushing the colossal state aside and taking on the role of service provider in place of the state. This implies many things to many people. First, there is a huge and unbridled expansion of the private, for-profit sector in almost all segments of societal governance, including education. In education, these changes have impacted higher education more than the school education, which remained largely the state responsibility even today. In countries like India, the idea of state responsibility of primary schooling has even led to making elementary education a fundamental right. However, it is essential to keep in mind that the neo-liberal market philosophies are also percolated to the primary education sector as well in recent times in the name of the proposals for public-private partnership. Higher education sector, on the other hand, fall an easy prey to the market forces as it has always been treated as a territory for the few. In other words, it is an accepted norm that higher education is primarily elitistic and access to it depends on various kinds of abilities - economic, academic, and social. The neo-liberal reform era seems to have added stress to the reliance of institutions and policies on the so called abilities. Reliance on academic ability is age old and

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has been the hall mark of the conservative societies which value 'survival of the fittest' sort of functionalist ideologies and that on the economic ability mainly draws its support from the capitalist ideology that seeks to homogenise the societies in terms of those who can or who has and who cannot or who does not have the means or resources to upward social mobility. It must, however, be kept in mind that both the functionalist ideology is also an off-shoot of the capitalistic developmental paradigm. Effect of these ideologies is immense on access and participation of various groups within higher education. It is this issue that the study aimed to examine in the light of neo-liberal shifts in the post 1990s era. It examines whether neo liberal reforms have accentuated or reduced the gender inequalities and gap in higher education. The study aims to locate the issue in the contemporary societal and economic contexts, with the help of mainly secondary data and literature in the fields of sociology of education and gender studies.

### **Gendered Access TO Higher Education**

Gender segregation has always existed in the educational systems across the world in almost all the societies. However, the experiences of each of the countries are different. For instance, a study by Bradley (2000) <sup>[7]</sup> from Western Washington University has empirically examined sex-segregation within higher education. She compares a wide range of countries from 1965 through 1990, using two measures of gender differentiation by field of study. Through this study she tried to show that the failure of greater gender parity in education to produce greater gender parity in labour market is not a paradox at all. With this hypothesis, data on the fields of study of graduates in countries throughout the world have been obtained from various volumes of the UNESCO statistical yearbook. In order to analyze the data collected through above mentioned secondary sources researcher developed tools. The extent to which women and men are distributed disproportionately throughout fields of study within systems of higher education was measured by both the index of dissimilarity and index of association. Major finding of the study was that although gender inequality in educational access decreased dramatically from 1965 to 1990, gender differentiation in the nature of men's and women's participation declined a little.

The degree of gender differentiation varied among countries, but the pattern was remarkably similar. Moreover, the study finds and concludes that the similarity between the gender differentiation patterns found in the labour market and in education suggests interplay between notions of universalism and particularism that has framed the educational choices of individuals in a gender differentiated manner. The researcher also concludes that country that is characterised by a strong gender-egalitarian ideology may also have greater proportions of women in male-dominated fields of study.

The discourse on women's higher education has over the years widened from mere description to more sociological and interdisciplinary enquiry though there exists a gap in understanding the impact of global changes as on women's participation in higher education. A study conducted by Sutherland (1988) <sup>[31]</sup> titled as "Women in Higher Education: Effects of Crisis and Change" has accounted number of third world countries as well as so called developed nations as having gradual growth of women's

enrolment into higher education. The survey indicated some continuing disadvantages of women in higher education. It revealed that there is a need to consider influences not only of educational preferences but of the labour market and other economic forces. It also reported that stereotypes and prejudices in relations to women's education are still persisting. Survey reflected that due to economic crisis and global changes, universities have happened to change their vision and forms and public education has remained only in a few regions as private players with high user costs have transformed higher education into a costly commodity leading to parents' inability to send their daughters for higher education.

In the realm of education the inequalities in terms of caste, class and gender intersect with each other which consequently produce a wider gap between privileged and unprivileged. In the case of women these inequalities turn out to be critical. Chitnis (1993) <sup>[15]</sup> argues that when gender encompasses social deprivations on caste, class and regional (rural urban) lines, women suffer the maximum disparities. In the words of Mukhopadhyay and Seymour (1994) <sup>[26]</sup> "among low-caste / class and tribal groups, poverty intersects with patrifocal family values to inhibit dramatically girls' education". (p.24). This explains how economic factors intersect with social factors in not only among families in developing nations but also those in the western industrialized nations to make women's access to education all the more critical. Schwager shows that for the western women also, it has taken more than two centuries of change and development to achieve educational parity with men. He further suggests that American women were at first educated to become better wives and mothers, with special intention for them being able to educate their sons into better citizens for the new republic.

### **Neo Liberal Structural Reforms and Issues of Gender Equity in Higher Education**

However various researches have argued in recent times that the kind of growth that is experienced today the world over as a result of neo liberal reforms, resulted in loss of equity-social and economic, increase in regional disparities, erosion of quality, loss of important academic disciplines (in favour of marketable disciplines) of study, change in attitudes, erosion in national, social and educational values. There have also been evidences of loss of equality due to neo-liberal reforms across the world in all societies. (Horton, Patogen, Cullity, Campbell & Parikh) Kerr for instance, points out that there remains the staggering inequality under present day neo liberalism, not only across but also within nations, he further holds that while neo-liberalism today has opened up new opportunities, not only for the super- rich but also for large sections of the contended middle class, there remain much larger clusters of the poor, both in advanced as well as less developed areas, who continue to be excluded from these opportunities.

Undoubtedly, evidences show that while the prosperity seems to have gone up in some segments of the society, in others, it had exacerbating the existing social and economic divides. In education sector, privatization led by neo- liberal reforms has resulted in unequal access and participation of individuals and groups. The privileged classes seem to have an easy access to education due to economic reasons whereas poor people remain vulnerable in the whole scenario. Apple (2001) <sup>[2]</sup> in this context argues that neo-

liberalism, has converted education into a market whereby knowledge is a commodity and people with varied specificities of race, class and gender have varying affordability to access education. He also points out that in the neo-liberal era, the 'marketized' systems of education have led to complex inequalities and wherein race intersects with class (Apple 2001:73) <sup>[2]</sup>. According to him, middle class parents are more likely to have the informal knowledge and skill to be able to decode and use marketized forms to their own benefit (Apple 2001:73) <sup>[2]</sup>. Reay (2010) <sup>[29]</sup> also observes social class practices and how that affects the educational decisions. Reay argues that increasingly, educational systems across the globe enshrine an educational competition premised on middle class levels of resources and defined by rules that advantage the middle classes. Thus in the context of neo-liberalism existing social class differences get further accentuated as working classes happen to be systematically and structurally excluded from the market driven educational processes. Ball (2003, 2007) <sup>[5, 4]</sup> also concurs with the perception that neo-liberal reforms in education have been fitting the middle classes extensively.

Apart from racial and class inequalities there have always been gender inequalities in education which are reinforced by the neo-liberal reforms. Women have always had poor access and participation at all levels of education due to various patriarchal, social, cultural and economic factors. But in the new and emerging scenarios of neo-liberalism, women's education is severely marred largely due to economic reasons, but substantiated by other social and cultural factors.

For example, higher education and marriage ironically have to occur during the same age for girls and both incur a lot of financial expenditure from the parents, forcing working class parents to make choices between higher education and marriage of their daughters. As a result, girls are barred from entering into higher education as marriage is the 'social action' which gets mandated by the patrifocal family structures and ideology. Drury (1993) <sup>[16]</sup> also observes that there is conservatism of values, with educated girls stereotyped by rural and working class parents as morally loose or overly independent. Now the question is that whether it is really the ingrained orthodoxy or it is a sort of defensive mechanism for the financially incapable parents to get rid of their daughters' higher education responsibility? Interestingly, many studies have proved the point straight forwardly that higher education is the possession of only middle or upper classes, but Drury (1993) <sup>[16]</sup> observes that such an education is possessed as cultural capital by middle class and is made available to their daughters and is distributed among middle class families as 'education dowry' of brides, as families take greater care to select young women who can provide a good educational environment in the home.

### **Feminist Perspectives to Understand Women's Participation in Higher Education**

To understand women's participation in education at all levels, theoretically, various feminist perspectives may be taken into consideration. Some thinkers such as Giroux 2004, Hill 2006, Tilak 2009 <sup>[18, 19, 32]</sup> argue that in the context of contemporary educational policy debates, where economic efficiency rather than social inequality is the key concern; what happens to boys is drawing more interest than

what happens to girls; and gender is considered as an important issue, such feminist perspectives on education theory, research and practice assume relevance. New forms of feminist theory seem to challenge the older frameworks of feminist analysis. For instance post-modernist feminist strand which is considerably a third wave of feminist thought upholds no more the laws of modernism of universality and similarity. Post-modernist feminists consider divisions within women as a category as central to the debate (Flax 1990) <sup>[17]</sup>. In the context of higher education, this central assumption leads us to question, if some women are really able to access higher education, then are they representative of all sections of the society. Scholars explain post structuralist and post-modernist feminism thought as stressing the idea that there are multiple subjectivities and that all women are not alike or equally subjugated (Mirza 1995, Morley and Walsh 1995, Chanana 2001) <sup>[2, 25, 10]</sup>. Hence, it becomes important to incorporate such developments of feminist thought in order to analyse and probe more critically into the problem and also to question the dominant feminist frameworks.

However it is important to note that it is difficult to straight jacket women's situation into one or two frameworks. Liberal feminism, socialist (Marxist) feminism, and radical feminism have been the three well known strands of feminist theories until very recently (Weiner 1994, Kachuck 2003). Liberal feminists argue that women evolved with men and participate in activities of social life equally. Hence they do not seek structural changes; instead emphasize on equal opportunities for women within existing system. This strand of feminism focuses on sex discrimination and contradictory socialisation processes. The entire structural analysis remained beyond the explanation advocated by liberalism on subordination of women. Chanana (2001) and Kachuck (2003) <sup>[10, 22]</sup> suggest that liberal feminism was not able to explain the persistence of deep gender divisions in the educational system, yet it remained successful in bringing women into the educational policy debate, thereby securing equality to a considerable extent. According to Acker (1994) <sup>[1]</sup>, liberal feminism focuses on public and professional life and wants to assimilate women into all levels of higher education and societal structures occupied by men. She also highlights that it seeks the opportunity for women to compete for positions without being blocked by sex discrimination, and sees higher education as the way for women to obtain skills and credentials necessary for career success. The justification liberal feminists give for education of women is based heavily on argument of social utility (Bensimon and Marshall 1997) <sup>[6]</sup>. Further, it focuses on discrimination, rights, justice and fairness (Arnot 2002) <sup>[3]</sup>. Thus, liberal feminism seems to be giving rise to the argument of the fact that women university teacher, a select group fail to be promoted to the professorship is unlikely to be solely due to the women's limitations (Arnot 2002) <sup>[3]</sup>.

Socialist (Marxist) feminism on the other hand undertakes the structural analysis to explain the women's subordinate position. With reference to the structure of capitalism, socialist feminism consider unequal position of women in economy and family as major sources of women's oppression and subordination. For this strand of feminism, capitalism and patriarchy are the parallel structures, which club together to subjugate women in every sphere of life (Kachuck 2003) <sup>[22]</sup>. It explains that capitalism reproduces unequal position of women in the spheres of labour market



and home. In this process working class men sustain the capitalist economy through their labour; women also do that by sustaining the labour power of men. In the realm of education, observes Weiner (1994) <sup>[34]</sup> the structures of capitalism play a role by reproducing gendered divisions of labour within classroom at school and university level.

Most socialist feminist theoreticians have focussed on women's position within the economy and family. As far as education is concerned the key question is how education is related to the reproduction of gender divisions within capitalism. Acker (1994) <sup>[1]</sup> analyzes socialist feminist framework and points out that in socialist feminism, curriculum differentiation processes within the school are important not only because girls are trained in office skills as word processing but because they are not trained in allied areas such as computer science or management that might allow entry into alternative careers (p.48). In this analysis the partnership between education and economy operates to confirm large number of girls and women in restricted, low paid sectors of employment. In the context of present study, socialist feminism can explain how mature women come to opt for courses of a specific kind and eventually get absorbed in semi-skilled professions of low wages.

According to radical feminism the source of women's subjugation lies solely in the structures of patriarchy. It explains patriarchy as the structure of domination of men over women (Kumar 1987, Uberoi 1995) <sup>[23, 33]</sup>. It advocates abolition of patriarchal structures completely to do away with women's oppression. Such a goal cannot be realised in short run as patriarchy is all pervasive and every society across the globe is characterised by it. Nambissan (2010) <sup>[27]</sup> upholds the view that patriarchal structures also underlie the educational processes and right from gendered socialisation at home, male dominated curricular socialisation at school can be observed. Radical feminism explains how male domination is maintained through biased curriculum and pedagogy and so the control over knowledge and its reproduction (Chanana 1988) <sup>[12]</sup>. It can be inferred from radical feminist strand that girls are socialised right from childhood to maintain educational responsibility and familial responsibility in such a way that family holds the priority. Accordingly girls are allowed to opt for so-called soft disciplines such as humanities and arts over maths and science. The discipline choices made by women at higher education level reflect as to how the status quo is maintained through patriarchal structures (Mukhopadhyay 1994, Chanana 2000 and Rao 2007) <sup>[29, 9, 28]</sup>.

Post-modernist feminist thought, as mentioned earlier, explains how developments like globalisation impacts upon women with specific backgrounds. Feminist educational thinking that addresses the impact of globalisation and neo liberal policies on education has been advocated by Brine (1999) <sup>[8]</sup>. In Brine's words "the oppressions of colonialism and patriarchy are interwoven with those of global capital, and reinforced by technological and cultural globalisation, individually and jointly serving the interests of the rich and powerful. In this account of globalisation, beneath the new drapings of global capitalism, cultural imperialism, global technology and the military, are the barely touched skeletal structures of patriarchy and colonialism".

According to Brine (1999) <sup>[8]</sup>, the emergence of neo colonialism applies more ideological and cultural ways to subjugate women. For instance, privatisation which is the result of neo liberal economic policies have left working

class women with poor bargaining power resulting in their low participation of them at higher education. Even the critical policy analysis in higher education also employ methods and theories of feminism that move beyond seemingly "neutral" analysis to directly address issues of power, status and context (Shaw 2004) <sup>[30]</sup>. Thus, it may be said that beyond social, religious and cultural factors there are economic, political factors along with macro level changes that affect women's participation in higher education. The links of economic-political and global factors with societal and cultural factors cannot be denied; hence it is in this context the study is an attempt to examine the issues of women's participation in higher education from a macro perspective and with the help of the literature available so far.

## Conclusion

The analysis highlights that neoliberal reforms have restructured higher education in ways that reinforce rather than dismantle gender inequalities. While enrolment figures for women have risen, participation continues to be shaped by patriarchal norms, caste and class hierarchies, and the commodification of education under market-oriented policies. Women remain concentrated in less marketable disciplines, with access and mobility restricted by intersecting economic, cultural, and social barriers. The feminist theoretical frameworks such as liberal, socialist, radical, and postmodern offer valuable insights into these dynamics. Liberal feminism underscores the importance of equal opportunity, but fails to address structural inequities. Socialist feminism reveals the dual role of capitalism and patriarchy in reproducing gendered divisions within education and labor markets. Radical feminism exposes the deep-rooted patriarchal structures shaping discipline choices and knowledge systems. Postmodernist feminism emphasizes the differentiated effects of neoliberal globalization, pointing out that women's experiences are diverse and not universally shared. In the Indian context, neoliberal reforms have deepened existing divides, privileging the middle and upper classes while marginalizing women from disadvantaged groups. To counter these inequities, education must be reasserted as a public good rather than a market commodity. This requires not only policy interventions that expand access but also a conscious effort to challenge patriarchal ideologies and structural barriers within the education system. Ensuring genuine gender equity in higher education demands sustained engagement with feminist theories that recognize both systemic exclusions and the varied realities of women's lives.

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