

Empowerment Higher Education Nexus: Women Celebrating Change in Hunza.

Abstract

This study was conducted with the aim to explore the factors that motivate young women in Hunza to seek education at tertiary level in various universities across the country. The purpose was also to examine the resources that facilitate women's access to higher education. Qualitative research design was used to investigate the phenomenon. In-depth interviews were taken from ten women who were selected by using purposive sampling method. The women respondents originally belonged to Hunza but they worked in various organizations in different capacities in Gilgit-Baltistan and Islamabad. The study illustrates that the greatest motivation for the women to acquire higher education was the desire for emancipation. The women wanted to reduce dependence on men and they believed education was the only route to achieve this desire. The findings also highlight that the greatest support for women's education came from their parents. Even where the financial status of parents was not sound it didn't act as a barrier. This indicates the fact that higher education of women has become a norm in Hunza. The informants were optimistic about the future status of women in their area. The majority of the women acted as agents of change and some of them were in key leadership positions. The study delineates that women's access to tertiary education is worth celebrating but what also needs to be celebrated is the change in the existing power structure.

Keywords: *Empowerment, higher education, Hunza, personal change*

INTRODUCTION

Education is universally accepted as one of the powerful sources for change in the contemporary world. Discourses about the importance of education have associated it

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with career success with personality development and character building (Ahmed, 2000; Rihani, 2006; Scully, 2006). Education is considered as one of the key factors in overcoming the barriers that women face in different contexts. It is believed to be the basic tool to bring women into the mainstream development and to empower them. When it comes to the discussion of women and education there are two different standpoints on the significance of education for women (Ali & Ali, 2015). These are the orthodox development perspective and the feminist perspective.

The orthodox development standpoint on the significance of education focuses on how to prepare women to fit in the capitalist market (Ali & Ali, 2015). Education is believed to enable women to perform their traditional duties in a better way (King & Hill, 1997). It is argued that educated women play a key role in raising their children in hygienic conditions. Education enables girls to actively participate in household decisions as well as political and economic decisions (UNESCO 2005). Educational participation of girls tends to improve infant and maternal mortality rates, fertility rates and health status, nutrition, literacy and economic growth (Hussain et al., 2003). Hence from the perspective of development education is instrumental since it benefits the society by reducing poverty and reinforcing economic growth (Wagner et al., 2008). From the feminist perspective education is important for the personal growth and empowerment of women (Ali, 2013; Kabeer, 2005). Feminist scholars have great faith that education not only provides knowledge and skills to improve health and livelihoods, but it empowers women to take their right place in society and the development process. Education gives status and confidence in decision making. Empowerment here is seen as women's ability to choose independently where they were denied such choices previously (Ali, 2014; Kabeer, 1999).

Academic research indicates that there is a direct relationship between literacy, power and empowerment (Unterhalter & Walker, 2007). By increasing their political and democratic participation and reducing domestic violence education offers empowerment for women (Subrahmanian, 2007). Educated women become more aware of legal rights and they are politically more active. This is especially so for highly educated women. Access to higher education enables women to participate in civic activities and in the process of democratic change by equipping students with critical thinking (Wagner et al., 2008). Higher education of women is also believed to increase women's aspirations and prospect regarding economic, civil, and political participation (Rezai-Rashti & Moghadam, 2011).

Participation of women in higher education around the world has been increasing day by day from 13 million in 1960 to 82 million in 1995 (UNESCO, 2005). In the context of Pakistan, despite the fact that the proportion of female is about 49% of the total population (Government of Pakistan, 2008) the literacy rates for females at all

levels is low. Importance of higher education for females in Pakistan is not well recognized due to lack of awareness about its prospective outcomes and a host of other factors which need to be promoted at all levels (Ahmed, 2005). In contrast to the bleak situation in the country in Hunza situated in Gilgit-Baltistan, literacy rates are reported to be as high as 75%, being the highest in the country (Hussain, 2013). Three quarters of people including the entire youth of both genders are believed to be able to read and write. It is reported that every child in Hunza attends school at least up to higher secondary level (Ghosh, 2014). Parents take special initiatives to offer quality education especially to their female children (Siddiqui, 2009).

The high literacy rates in Hunza can be attributed to a number of factors. Among these the most significant are the efforts of Aga Khan III Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah and the present Aga Khan who have contributed to educational development of the area by providing access to female through a network of the Aga Khan Education Services (Siddiqui, 2009). More recently, private educational institutions are also playing an important role in increasing or upgrading literacy rates. The establishment of the Karakoram University in Gilgit has also provided a space especially for higher education of women locally. Students who were previously unable to pursue their higher education due to financial constraints and other issues can now easily acquire education at their doorstep. This has decreased the cost of higher education and is a relief for those parents who were unable to send their daughters to cities for higher education due to financial constraints. This study was conducted to explore the factors that motivate young women in Hunza to seek higher education at tertiary level. The aim was also to investigate the resources including the socio-cultural factors that facilitate or impede the higher education of women in the context of Hunza. The following research questions were addressed.

- What motivates young women in Hunza to seek education at tertiary level?
- What are the resources that facilitate the higher education of women?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research identifies several interrelated social, economic and religious factors that have direct or indirect influence on women's education. These include type of family, the education and occupation of parent, religious beliefs, geographical location of schools, and exposure to mass media among others (Hertz & Sperling, 2004; Materu, 2007). Some of these factors will be discussed here. It is important to discuss these factors at the onset since women's education and ultimately their empowerment is deeply interweaved and interrelated with the socio-cultural spaces where they live. Gender composition is one of the factors that have been widely discussed in previous literature in relation to access to women's education (Dancer &

Rammohan, 2004). It is believed that in patriarchal societies gender composition affects educational outcomes of children and hence the education of male children is given priority over female children (Burney & Irfan, 1991; Yu & Su, 2005).

Research in Pakistan has found that age and sex compositions of household matter in the provision of education to young girls and boys (Ahmed, Ali & Khan, 2005). In the context of Turkey it has been argued that gender discrimination at household level effects educational investment in children (Smits & Hosgor, 2006). Besides gender composition, the socio-economic status of parents is of vital importance for providing access to girls' schooling (Burney & Irfan, 1991). Likewise, research shows that occupation of individuals also effects access to education (Hamid, 1993; King & Bellew, 1990). In particular studies in East Asia have found that mothers' occupation has positive effect on the daughter's education (Yu & Su, 2005). In contrast studies in Pakistan have reported that mothers' education may as well be a barrier towards girl's education (Ahmed et al., 2005). This is because it is argued that mother's employment increases the chances of their daughters' staying at home to look after the younger siblings and to do household chores (Tansel, 1997). Nevertheless, there is evidence that unemployed mothers are more likely to support the education of their daughters (King & Bellew, 1990).

Parents' educational attainment has also emerged as a powerful predictor of their children's educational levels in many studies (e.g. Ahmed, 2005; Hindin, 2005). It is believed that the attitude of educated parents towards the education of their children is positive as compared with illiterate parents (Smits & Hosgor, 2006; Maralani, 2004). It has also been found that parents' education, especially the mothers' education has a strong effect on school attendance of girls (Aakvik et al., 2005; Beblo & Lauer, 2004; Jayachandran, 2002; Keng, 2004; Maitra, 2003). It is argued that the children of educated mothers tend to perform well in the academia and in the labor market (Lauer, 2003). Dilli (2006) points out that mothers' education level is an important determiner of children's educational attainment and opportunities. When mothers are educated children, especially girls, have higher level of educational enrolment and attainment (Moghadam & Roudi-Fahimi, 2005). The education of parents has been found to be positively related to educational attainment levels of children in Pakistan as well (Sawada & Lokshin, 2001).

Likewise, the adverse effect of traditional thinking on access to female education at all levels has been illustrated in empirical research. It has been found that the values of family head, traditional beliefs of the family and their attitude towards female education play a significant role in ensuring access to female education (Ahmed, 2005; Buchmann & Hannum, 2001). In addition to the factors discussed above other factors which influence the access to female education include the literacy level of the

community (Burney & Irfan, 1991) and the distance of educational institutions (Sawada & Lokshin, 2001; World Bank, 2005). In addition, income of family also affects access to girl's education. This is believed to be more influential at primary level of education not at university level as such (Aakvik et al., 2005; Dancer & Rammohan, 2006). Importantly, women's reproductive roles and expectations from the society also impede women's access to education (Subrahmanian, 2005) especially in patriarchal societies where women's lives are controlled by men. Hence, the power structure of the society and traditional gender norms play a key role in determining if women gain access to education institutions (Smits & Hosgor, 2006). The above discussion clearly indicates that there are several factors that play important role in providing access to females' education. While the literature gives an overview of the enabling and disabling factors for women's education yet a clear gap exists in terms of presenting the voices of women. What motivates women to go for higher education and how this process of being educated is facilitated? To address this gap the present study aims to explore factors which contribute in providing access towards higher education of girls in Hunza.

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted by using qualitative research design in order to be able to gain an in-depth insight about the respondent's lives and their experiences of higher education (Creswell, 2003). The target population for this study was highly educated women from Hunza and Gilgit-Baltistan. Ten women belonging to Hunza were selected by using purposive sampling method (Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling is time and cost effective. Snow ball technique was supportive to find more respondents belonging to Hunza valley (Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

The decision to select a small number of respondents was to be able to focus on their experiences from emic perspective. The women were based in Hunza, in central Gilgit and in Islamabad. The respondents were from different backgrounds. All the women had completed their tertiary education from different universities across Pakistan. Three women had the opportunity to study from abroad. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with the women. The interviews were taken either in the respondents' offices or at their homes. Each interview lasted for 40 to 60 minutes. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the respondents and were transcribed and translated later on. The respondents were contacted before each interview. The interview was arranged in a place and on time suitable to the respondents. The respondents were assured that the data will be used for the purpose of research only. Since some of the women were not approachable they were interviewed over the phone. After the data was transcribed it was then coded rigorously. The codes were read repeatedly and categorized into different themes. The

transcribed data was shared with the respondents for cross checking the information. All possible measures have been taken in order to maintain confidentiality of the respondents. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the paper to respect the privacy of the respondents.

Findings and Discussion

In the light of the research questions posed at the beginning of this paper the data has been divided into two main themes including the motivation of women for higher education and resources available to women for gaining access to higher education. These will be discussed in length in the following part of the paper followed by a discussion on the achievements related with women's access to higher education that needs to be celebrated.

Motivation for Education

Academic research shows that providing access to girl's education is a huge problem in patriarchal societies (e.g. Jejeebhoy, 2002). Young girls are believed to be helping hands at home and they are not sent to schools. Likewise young women encounter constraints in gaining access to university education. However, the findings from this study show that the residents of Hunza seemed to be very progressive about education of women. The data illustrates that women aspired to go for higher education and parents too were eager to support the higher education of their daughters. This was evident from the narratives of almost all the respondents who stated that it was quite normal for girls to go for higher studies in contemporary Hunza.

The respondents of this study presented multiple meanings of education. Nevertheless, the responses of majority of the women clearly illustrate that the major motivation for acquiring higher education was the desire for personal growth and empowerment. The respondents were very positive that it was only through higher education that women could change their circumstances in a positive way. Some of the respondents were of the view that through education individual's mental thoughtfulness are enhanced and matured. Relating education to personal growth one of the respondents stated; "education enlightens individuals." The women respondents of this study associated education with positive changes in their lives. The majority of them were of the view that access to higher education had totally changed their thinking and their attitude towards life. For example Mehnaz stated,

I now think positively in every situation and I am capable to analyze things more deeply. Education has given me confidence and I am able to find solutions to problems...I feel proud of myself as an educated person.

The quote indicates that for Mehnaz education was associated with in-depth analysis of issues and the ability to solve problems independently and importantly she associated education with enhanced level of confidence. These are all attributes leading to agency. This is evident from the fact that increased confidence and the ability to make their own decisions had inculcated feelings of worth among the individuals. Maturity, confidence and critical thinking were also evident from the narratives of Sanam who reported, *“I can say this with confidence that my personality has totally changed after my university education. I am mature and I can understand things and I am able to think critically and analytically”*. The majority of the women respondents relating higher education with personal change acknowledged that their entire perspective about the world had changed. They had not only begun to think critically as stated above but they had begun to be reflexive. They reported to analyze things from a different lens. Nosheen stated; *“I can see; now I have entirely different approach towards things. I look at them through different angles. Besides, after getting higher education my love for serving my community has aroused more”*.

The above excerpts clearly demonstrate that education was deeply associated with personal change for the women and it is personal change that basically leads to empowerment too. The respondents’ narratives clearly indicate that they felt empowered and they exhibited empowerment. Importantly they related personal empowerment with the empowerment of the community. This indicates that empowerment for these women were not entirely personal it was always entangled with the need to be able to fulfill familial and communal responsibilities. While associating higher education with empowerment, Taiba explained; *“Higher education is a weapon for a women to empower herself in male dominated society because without education a woman is always marginalized.”*

The above excerpt clearly indicates that the women were positive that education was the only source of escape from patriarchal society. The use of the word weapon here is very strong and shows the importance of education for these women. The women had great faith that access to higher education was the only way to reduce male dependence and to have an independent life and to reduce dependence on others. The respondents clearly believed that education not only rescued them from the patriarchal set up and had reduced their dependence on them but it had given them control over what they desired to do. The following quote by Sonya explains this well.

I think when a woman is educated; she is more aware of things and is in control of her life. Besides, when an educated woman starts earning, she is valued more in the family as

well as in the society at large because of the economic value. She also has say in the decision making.

This excerpt indicates that access to higher education was not only linked with empowerment but with respect as well. This respect was believed to be largely related with economic benefit to the family. Women are valued and respected and they are included in decision making because they are contributing to the family income.

The respondents also explained that higher education is important for strengthening the role of women in the household. They were of the view that education is important to benefit the new generation. Taiba for example stated that when a mother is well educated she can bring up her children well and can give them good moral values. Similarly, Sanam explained that since children spend most of their time with their mothers so mothers can play an important role in raising children well. This also illustrates that the women related education not only with personal growth and empowerment but empowerment of the family as well. Higher education of women was also associated with the status of women in the society. The majority of the respondent acknowledged that the status of women in Hunza was much better as compared to women in other rural areas. Sonya narrates this in the following words, *“Although there are several good reasons for women to get education but at the top of all it gives women equal status in the society especially in a patriarchal one”*.

Education was also interlinked with career growth and leadership potentials. A number of women respondents viewed education as a way to construct leadership qualities among individuals. Some of the women were already on job when they had decided to go for higher education and for these women education had proved to be an instrument to be able to experience career growth. Others reported that after they had finished higher studies and gained employment they still had the desire to learn more and to have more in life, to be able to make it to the top, to be able to compete with men, to have better and equal status in the society. Three of the women respondents in this study were in key leadership positions and they were of the view that the purpose of education is not only to gain access to employment but education prepares women to gain equal rights in every sphere of life.

They explained that education should be able to prepare women to become aware of their rights, their role in the family, and their status in the society. These and other women had strong hopes that educated women should be able to change the society. For example, Sanam stated “educated women can motivate and mold any rigid society.” This indicates that education leads to personal empowerment but it also leads to the empowerment of the community. The above narratives of the women clearly demonstrate that education was always linked with personal change,

confidence, and empowerment. So it was the desire for empowerment which motivated the women for going for university education.

Resources for Education

Earlier in the paper it was discussed that occupation of parents is an important predictor of access to higher education. Academic literature shows that parents who were relatively well off tend to send their daughters for higher education (e.g. Ahmed, 2005; Hindin 2005). The data from this study highlights that the people of Hunza were not necessarily landlords or earning very high income. The majority of the women who participated in this study belonged to middle class or lower middle class families. However, they had managed to attend universities at national and international levels.

Hence, support from parents for the education of women was clearly evident from the narratives of almost all the women respondents. Some of them were lucky to have educated parents who motivated them for go for higher education and getting enrolled in the subjects of their choice. For example one of the respondents Asma stated,

Born into an educated family was a kind of motivating factor for me to go for higher studies. The most inspirational figure in my life is my father of course who has always been behind me to encourage me through his own achievements and via his moral support.

Likewise, Asma Mehnaz too acknowledged the support of her father as the person behind her access to higher education and her success in life. She stated; “I always idealize my father. His knowledge and other qualities are the sources that inspired me to get higher education.” Similarly Nosheen explained the support from her family in the following way.

My family has always been an excellent support for me..... my mother has always been a great inspiration for me; she has supported our entire family at the time when my father did not have a job. She has supported me through every thick and thin.

The above statements show that the support of parents is vital to facilitate women’s participation in higher education. The findings indicate that the support for women’s education not only came from educated families but parents who were illiterate too emphasized on the importance of education for their daughters. Importantly the above

excerpts give an important message that the support for women's education came from both men and women. For Mehnaz and Asma the support had been offered from their fathers but for Nosheen it was the mother who had not only supported the family at the time when her husband was jobless but had facilitated the education of Nosheen as well. This also indicates that motivated women tend to provide support for their daughter's education no matter what the financial circumstances may be. Similar kind of support was evident from the narratives of other women. For women whose parents could not support their higher studies financially scholarship was an option. The majority of the respondents reported that women of Hunza were conscious about scholarship opportunities and they strived hard to acquire such opportunities where available. Some of the respondents reported to have availed scholarships at national and international levels. However the women respondents acknowledged that few people got the opportunity to get scholarship and the process of looking for and applying for scholarships was not an easy task. Women had to struggle persistently.

Almost all the respondents were of the view that the people of Hunza were aware of the significance of education. Gulistan expressed this in the following words;

People of Hunza are aware of the importance of education. They send their daughters to cities for higher education. Where finance becomes a problem people tend to seek loan from banks. Therefore the literacy rate of Hunza is high as compared to other regions of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Hence, the women respondents were of the view that the people of Hunza were very supportive about women's right for education. They believed that in modern Hunza people were conscious about the education of their daughters and gave great emphasis to university education. The respondents were of the view that there were many factors which resulted in this change in the attitude of people towards women's education which was not so years back. Nosheen explained this in the following words.

Perception of people of Hunza towards higher education has changed a lot due to the emerging organizations and institutions in the region. These have influenced people's minds so much that their perception about women's education has changed a lot.

This excerpt clearly shows that national and international organizations have played an important role in changing the attitude and perception of people towards women's education in the area.

Celebrating Achievements

The paper so far illustrated that women have gained access to higher education for the sake of personal empowerment and change and support from families has been a major catalyst for allowing access to higher education. Here, it is important to think about the changes that education has afforded. What have women achieved as a result of access to education in Hunza? The findings highlight that higher education has allowed access to work. The private space for women has increased; women are equally contributing to the family income by their participation in paid work which is a new role they are performing. This indicates that the traditional society in Hunza is changing and women's higher education and work is being accepted as a norm in the area. Nevertheless, this change in gender roles has deep implications. Access to work means the women's responsibilities have also increased and they are performing double roles at home and at work. Hence access to education and work has not relieved women from traditional duties. They continue to perform such responsibilities. In addition, women reported to have faced problems in male dominating professions. Asma expressed this in the following way, "*I have seen a number of law graduates (women) who moved out of Gilgit-Baltistan just because the male dominant society failed to accommodate them*".

This indicates that women's work remains gendered no matter how progressive societies may seem towards their education. Importantly, the data shows that not only are the gender roles changing in Hunza but expectations from the community about highly educated women too are changing in the local space. The women explained that the society expects that they should be able to give their services to the community; the families expect care and love and support financially as well. For example one of the woman informants Mehnaz stated that, "our society expects that we bring new trends and teach good things to the youth and try to eliminate evils in the society". Further the women were of the view that highly educated women upon return are expected to act as role models and to act as agents of change. The women respondents reported to response to such expectations in different ways. For example some of them reported to have organized different sessions, gatherings, awareness programs, seminars and so on. Asma expressed this in the following words.

Being the first female Judge in whole of GB, I think I have already contributed in developing a new hope and career guidance for the rest of the female's around. I try my best to be a useful part of the society by playing my role. For instance I often deliver voluntarily services, which I believe is my responsibility.

In addition to the societal and familial expectations women's personal expectations were also reported to have changed after university education. For example, Fozia stated, *"I think I have started to dream big and it was only possible because of my university education."* However, the increased expectations from themselves and the desire to meet the expectations of others seemed to have overburdened the women. Nevertheless, the respondents considered this positive. They acknowledged that it was a challenge yet they reported to be content to be a useful part of the society and to be able to serve their community. They considered themselves as active citizens and they took pride in this new status even at the expense of increased workload. This is an example of how the women actually felt empowered. For them empowerment was beyond being able to gain access to education and employment but it was being able exercise agency, having feelings of self-worth, realizing the role they were playing and taking pride in it.

The women respondents were very optimistic and they were ambitious and enthusiastic about their future career and about the future of women in their community. Some of the aspirations they had for future included the desire to set up personal firms and enterprises, to be environmentalists, to be social activists and to be academics. Yet some of the women wanted to be able to have a balanced life, to be good mothers and wives and to be successful women as well. Some of the responses of the women are given below. Asma stated; *"My goal is to establish a law firm from where people not only find counsels to fight their case but also to give legal help to women in my area regarding her legal rights"*.

In this quote the respondent shows her desire to be able to educate women about their rights and she has a clear vision of how this can be done and what role she can play during this process. Likewise, another respondent Nosheen desired to be a social activist so that she could focus on women's issues. She planned to make initiatives to include more and more women in education. This shows the concern of highly educated women for other employed women in the area. Women like Nosheen were eager to be able to play their role by providing support to address the issues of such women. So empowerment for them was to have personal change but also to be an agent of change.

Similarly, Sanam raised her concern towards an important issue that is violence against nature and how she can educate people to have empathy towards nature. She stated, *"I would like to be able to play my role to eradicate the violence against nature."* Fozia perceived herself as a successful academic and to be able to support women's education. She was ambitious to be able to get a PhD degree and teach at university. She desired to support the education of women and to act as change agent. Finally, Shehnaz pointed out the need to have a balanced life to be a successful

entrepreneur but at the same time to be a good wife and mother. The excerpt also points out her desire to be able to serve others.

I see myself as a successful woman having a good balance between my business and family life. I see myself to be accomplishing all the tasks that a house wife does and at the same time I would like to be successful in the corporate sector.

The narratives of Shehnaz in the last quote clearly show that access to higher education had not only empowered the woman personally but it had also inculcated a sense of responsibility in her; responsibility to rethink about her role as a woman in relation to the society. She seems to be clearly aware of her personal as well as communal responsibilities and had plans to address them in meaningful ways. All the excerpts given above clearly indicate the change that the women had experienced and the ways they looked at themselves and the ways they looked at the world. They were able to look ahead and they had a sense of responsibility for themselves and for other women in their society. They acknowledged having a sense of inclusion in the community and they were contributing towards the development process in their own unique ways in their capacity.

CONCLUSION

Education is one of the most powerful sources for change and this is a fact accepted universally. This study highlighted that women's access to higher education is a result of their own personal efforts as well as the motivation and support of their parents. It was found that access to university education is playing a significant role in empowering women of Hunza. The women spoke of how education had given them a sense of worth in addition to feelings of independence and confidence. The fact that support for women's education came from men too illustrates that women's empowerment need the support of men and other women. As discussed in the literature in the beginning of the paper gender composition of the family was not necessarily related to women's access to higher education in Hunza. Occupation and education of parents were important but these did not necessarily act as barriers towards women's higher education. Illiterate parents too facilitated their daughters to acquire higher education. The fact that the women of Hunza acted as agents of change indicates a major change in community's perception of women's higher education and work. The power structures may not have changed yet the changes we do see in women's lives is something worth celebrating.

In order to facilitate women's empowerment it is recommended that measures should be taken by the state to provide support for the higher education of women. This can be materialized through need based scholarship programs for women. In addition, quotas can be formed for young women in leading universities across the country. These measures can encourage women to aspire for higher education thus increasing women's participation at tertiary level. Importantly, support is also needed from other stakeholders including civil society, teachers, and family. The findings from this paper have clearly illustrated that support from family is vital for the higher education of women and their empowerment.

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