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Educated women's ways of knowing *on* gender, education and social transformation: Exploring *Actionable Space*

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Abstract: How do women with higher education view their own experiences of being educated in their everyday life? How do they understand and address gender relations as educated women? What is their analysis of gender and social transformation in the contemporary Indian society? This paper examines these questions in the light of educated women's experiences. Stories and narratives of five women living in urban Bangalore in Southern India provide the ground to inquire into issues of gender and social transformation.

This paper argues that theoretical perspectives supporting transformation through education do not effectively address the everyday experiences of women living in traditional societies such as India, which are rooted in tradition, patriarchy, power and control. The women participants of this study, which was conducted for a doctoral thesis, illuminate their negotiations within private and public domains of life with tensions, conflicts and turning points. They narrate the internalised goals of their education, achievements through education and their position of remaining traditional women, a constant in a rapidly changing society. They provide valuable insights regarding position and power in gender relations. Analysing their insights and recommendations about what needs to be done with education for future generation of girls in terms of social transformation, the author identifies the gaps within ability, action and space for change. The author proposes a new theoretical construct called Actionable Space, which underlines women's dilemma and also the available space to take action for change in their life circumstances.

Key words: Women, education, experiences, India, *Actionable Space*, change.

Background to this paper:

I have always wanted to understand more about women's experiences, women living their everyday life as I became sensitive to the ways how women in my lived world often talked about tensions, conflict and dilemma in their everyday life. As I listened to more stories I grew more interested in educated women's experiences opening myself to the multiple ways of understanding educated women through their autobiographies. Sometime during my master's degree research in Australia I read that Indian women hesitated to speak about their life stories (Das quoted by Vattam, 2001). I felt more committed to my learning more of their ways of life, a realization that came from the awareness of how little I could be knowing of their everyday experiences.

The general society appreciates educated women being employed in public life and doing their roles better in their private life. Does this mean those women are equal and successful in life (Hughes, 2002)? The intentions of formal education are to facilitate their agency, their critical thinking and their capabilities. However the general view of educated women, in my lived world in India has been one of "a better wife, a better mother and a better negotiator."

What is the experience of an educated woman, going beyond this all-too-good image? If education is really thought of as a channel to enhance our capabilities, decision-making, our skills, our worldview and our sense of our self, examining women's experiences was necessary from their own autobiographical accounts. I chose this path, in my doctoral degree research, to understand more about educated women from their experiences of being educated. This paper is a part of my doctoral research.

Introduction:

In India education has been thought of as a channel that develops a person and also prospers a person's life. Thoughts and words from ancient texts, folklore, proverbs and historical anecdotes support this. Literacy is seen as a necessity. However, there is a vast documentation, through written and oral history, folklore of the paradoxical position of Indian women – their agency is celebrated alongside awareness of their subjugation in a patriarchal society. While education in the postcolonial times is seen to bring reforms in the public life, there have arguments that education may not bring in much social change, changing women's second-class citizen status. Yet an educated woman, being employed, is viewed as an asset for the family's progress. An

educated woman would bring her children up better. Would participate better in managing her family. This image of an educated woman is grippingly contradictory, which raises critical questions about their personal agency and expression.

My purpose in this paper is to discuss educated women's ways of knowing on gender and education. Through this discussion emerge the insights on social transformation with regard to gender relations, changes to girls' education and understanding of educated women's lived experiences. To begin with I present a brief overview of perceived goal and aim of education, arguing that the notion of an educated person still remains an imagination, not a reality, given the situation of education perpetuating divisions. In that again, there is a strong research focus on the differential experiences of education among boys and girls. The specific issues of equity, access and relevance of education for women in their lives are also being researched, problematizing gender relations, women and higher education, disciplinary choices, gendered leadership, women's participation in the academia and so on. On the other hand, more specifically, educational experiences of women of rigid traditional cultures have not been illuminated much for a deeper examination, for an investigation into what they feel about being educated, although there are a few exceptions (for example (Narayan, 1997).

From this background I discuss the experiences of five educated women, their texts on being educated. An interpretation of their experiences is done around turning points of learning and unlearning, and the underlying tones of their texts, providing insights on their torn between feeling as being educated women. I identify this feeling as a contradictory experience of being educated women. Then I answer the 'so what' question with the proposition of a theoretical construct *Actionable Space* not only to analyse women's educational experiences but also to address deeper socio-cultural contextual issues related to girls' and women's education.

Perceived goal and aim of education: A brief overview

Upon reflection, an educated person may act towards social change with better informed participation in his/her lived world. There are varying definitions of education related to learning taking place in the well-established institutionalised contexts towards achieving certain ends (India, 1975). Freire (1973; 1985; 1987) looks upon education taking place through dialogues between the self and the relational world with the self as the actor knowing the world with a critical consciousness. Dewey (1938) emphasizes the organic connection between education and

personal experience. Grumet (1992) affirms education as a process of experiencing the world, “whenever we speak of education, we are speaking of a person’s experience in the world” (p.29).

The United Nations approach to the aim of education is set in Article 13 of the ICESCR (“International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,” 1966): “education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity.” This sense of dignity may be achieved if education is experienced with honesty at life with a free mind. Rabindranath Tagore an exponent of innovative experiments in educational experiences, viewed education as a right, which enabled individuals and communities to act on reflection (cited in PROBE, 1999; Sen, 2005). Amartya Sen (1993, 1999, 2005) establishes a connection between education developing one’s capabilities and contributing towards experiencing human freedoms. Evidently his work ‘*Development as Freedom*’ has an orientation for education leading to human freedoms viz., political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security (1999). Sen’s concept of freedom is drawn from Tagore’s thoughts on freedom of mind and experiments on education (see Chapter 5 in Sen 2005). The hope of one’s education may be towards achieving this beautifully free human mind. However this hope looks larger than the everyday reality of many educated Indian women who are expected to remain constant in a rapidly changing society (Chanana, 2001).

Several detailed analyses of girls’ and women’s situation in India have documented and publicized the various forms of gender discrimination, including exclusion of girls and under-participation of women in education area, prevalent in the country (for example *Towards Equality* (India, 1975); <http://www.un.org.in/wicnts.htm>). The area of gender, education and development has undergone several frameworks such as women in development, gender and development, theoretical approaches such as post-structural and post-colonial theories and several understandings of education such as schooling, conscientization, deconstructive (Unterhalter, 2005, p.16).

The most recent framework of human capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000a, 2000b; Nussbaum & Sen, 1993) demands that education of a person be viewed as a key capability and education be viewed as the key to achieve human freedoms (Sen, 1999, 2005). Sen’s arguments on women and men, education and freedom are concerned with articulating human development as a freedom of each human being’s free expression of what they value. However, capability approach or viewing women’s education as a capability to achieve freedom (or equality) must also address the issues

of social and cultural forces, the inclusiveness of women in their society as free and equal human beings, which is currently not so. The framework and the notion of human freedoms tends to hold education as an answer to all problems, thus universalizing all human being's life contexts. Although Sen pays particular attention to gender inequalities prevalent in Indian society maintaining that education removes much of the inequalities (Sen, 2005, see Chapter 11), we need to be alert to the possibilities of practitioners being more sensitive towards the removal of inequalities related to the material conditions, but not the deeply ingrained, internalized beliefs and practices from the influence of socialization which educated women themselves tend to continue, as Sen has noted (Sen, 2005, p.250).

Issues related to women's ways of knowing:

Recognising the significance of women's voice, Carol Gilligan (1991) raised important questions about the experiences of girls and women while they lived the process and content of education. The feminist history on and of women's voice is continuing even more strongly in our times as "the past always and essentially gives rise to multiple histories, histories undertaken from different perspectives of the present" (Grosz, 2000, 2005). The past of women's absence in educational history, their experiences in the masculine paradigm of education has been voiced so effectively by (Martin, 1985) that her arguments and deliberation on women's educational experiences are generating multi-layered research areas of philosophy and sociology of education (Martin, 1985, 1991). Davies (1989; 1993), within the framework of postmodernism, provides yet another insight about male learner, masculine nature of education and gender bias. Writing on gender inequalities, issues of women, education and development Stromquist asserts on knowledge-building capacities of women through literacy, arguing that literate women can negotiate better with men (Stromquist, 1990, 1996). On the other hand, works of Pateman (1988; 1989) and MacKinnon (1989) have generated solid ground to analyse women's experiences within the public and the private, providing critical insights to question the liberal educational framework. Particularly, Pateman's (1988) sexual contract framework pointed out, under a new set of lens, the gender relations operating in societies. This contract, still very much in operation in Indian society, influences women's participation and identity in situations of politics, social relations, economic productivity. Most women, irrespective of education, are living unarticulated, culturally specific gender relations that are viewed normal. The acceptance of such normal roles including roles of care, home-maker, wife and mother transfer the women's experiences to their next generation of girls although claims of gender-neutral education have often been made.

Significance of educated Indian women's experiences

A number of researchers have illuminated gender inequalities and differential experiences of girls in education in Indian society (for example (Bhasin, 1996; Bordia, 2000; Burra, 2001; Ghosh & Talbani, 1996; Singh, 2002; Talbani, 2001). Often arguments around female education is linked to their specific roles in the private domains of life and expectations of the public. Their insights underline the patriarchal structures, influences of tradition and culture on education to girls and participation of women in private and public spheres of life (Arya, 1990; Bhadra, 2000; Grover & Bhardwaj, 2002; Subramaniam, 2000). The contemporary, politically-supported, adage 'a learned woman is her family's treasure' projects a positive attitude towards female education in India. However, the same adage implies that she is the pillar of the family, an identity that a woman may be proud of, in her roles of a care-taker, giver, nurturer and peace-keeper. This identity also gives female attributes to a woman who as a girl is trained to adopt them as hers.

Vedic period of Indian history claims education and participation of women. Although women scholars such as Gargi are quoted often, the oral historical story that is not told often has also registered the male scholars of Gargi's times forbidding her from celebrating her learned identity. While there is a mixture of good images of educated women, women writers in Indian history ((Tharu & Lalita, 1991, 1993) there is not much documentation of their actual experiences of how they felt as educated women. Progressive thinkers and social activists like Ishwarachandra Vidyasagar and Jyotiba Phule who supported female education perceived oppression of women in both private and public spheres of life causing many forms of social inequalities (Forbes, 1996).

While several research studies provide a general appraisal of the situation in relation to girls' education, educational outcomes in the gendered nature of education (Patel, 1998; Unterhalter & Dutt, 2001), research on the lived experiences of girls and women of their education has not been prioritized (Chanana, 2001). Few years ago I co-ordinated a certificate course on human rights for undergraduate students in Bangalore city and documented girls' experiences related to human rights and their awareness. From the interview narratives of the college girls I identified gaps in their awareness on women's rights and also their experiences of education. The analysis showed that the girls' educational experiences were based on the stereotypes, that they were experiencing sex-biased treatment at home and in the public. I linked my analysis of girls' experiences of education to my theoretical concept of *Actionable Space*, which is a space that the girls are aware

of with push and pull feelings, suggesting attitudinal changes in policy and practice (Sharma-Brymer, 2005). This paper examines women's lived experiences of being educated in considerable depth with an extended description of *Actionable Space*.

Purpose and question of the research study

The purpose of my research project was to study what was the experience of being educated. The single research question that was posed to the participants was how and what did they feel about themselves as being educated women. Sub-questions were developed later as and when the necessity arose during the first interview and that were developed based upon what was told during the first interview.

Selection of participants

The research interviews were conducted during the months March, April and May of 2003. From among the 30 women that I interacted with, all living in Bangalore city of Southern India, I finally was able to record the full interviews with 12 participants.¹ Care was taken to include those women who started their schooling after the 1966 Kothari Commission report on education. The selection of the final participants and final use of the interview transcripts for analysis and interpretation was purposive; my purpose was to interview women whose profiles were as different as possible from each other. Kanaka, Rani, Vinoda, Nirmla and Mani are unique as individual women, having their own insights on life. Each woman's experiences, around one single common thread of being educated, were uniquely different either "with regard to experience or in relation to responses to similar situations" (Gulati, 1993, p.22). Religion, caste and class were not considered important criteria for selection as the methodological approach/framework of the study was phenomenological.

Methodological framework

Phenomenology is the descriptive study of an experience. A phenomenon is essentially what appears to someone (Sokolowski, 2000; Spiegelberg, 1981; Spinelli, 1989). Phenomenological

¹ For this paper I have used only five participants' interview texts. Two rounds of interviews were conducted for two to three hours each. Minimum educational qualification was completion of a bachelor's degree (10+2+3 years). Some of them had many more university degrees/diplomas.

inquiry is a revisiting of our experience in contemplative mode for the purpose of discovering, not how culture has taught us to understand phenomena, but how these phenomena immediately present themselves to us (Crotty, 1996). The knower simply understands the known through the act of knowing (van Manen, 1990). The participants of this research describe their experiences from their life world, their lived space, lived time and lived place as educated women. This description is of primary importance in the study as their experiences illuminate the essential phenomena impacting upon them, such as tradition, culture, society, language and objective material conditions.

For a discussion of women's experiences in this study I used hermeneutic analysis, which looks into the texts of experiences. Hermeneutic phenomenological frame enriches the exploration of the meanings that are existing in the texts and the underlying messages of the sub-texts, all along illuminating individual experiences of women with rich evocative meanings (van Manen, 1997). Hermeneutic phenomenology respects and celebrates women's words, the sub-texts within their speech layers – affirming the realities of their lived world (Grumet, 1992). The idea of education as a metaphor communicating with the world of experience (Grumet, 1992, p.29) offers exciting possibilities for an interpretation of their lived experiences in relation to the objective material conditions of their lives and the tensions, conflicts with dilemmas ever present. Women, in this sense, need a space to constantly revisit their inner worlds and reappear/reconstruct their experiences in the present bringing to the fore the unknown to the known consciousness. Phenomenology powerfully engages with such an embodied experience by illuminating the private and the public, women's experiences located in these two inter-twining, overlapping spheres. From such an interpretive stand more epistemological knowledge is produced on women's experiences and their life.

Profiles of the five women participants

Kanaka

Kanaka is a teacher working in a private school close to her house. She is trained to teach Hindi language but teaches all subjects to the primary and the higher primary school children. She has a bachelor's degree in Arts. She is 43, married with two daughters and a son. Her husband works in the public sector telephone factory.

Rani

Rani is the founder lecturer and also head of Physics department in an undergraduate college. She is 36 and is single. Rani has a younger sister and two younger brothers, all unmarried at the time of the interviews. All hold a bachelor's degree and employed in Bangalore.

Nirmala

Nirmala is a 39 year old woman, married with a son and a daughter. She has diploma in Secretarial Practice and a bachelor's degree in commerce and accounts. She was employed in the administrative posts for about 17 years and resigned her job in 2000.

Vinoda

Vinoda is a Hindi language teacher in a government-aided high school. She has a bachelor's degree, a B.Ed. and an M.A. with Hindi language as a major subject. She is married to her sister's husband, has a 3 year old son.

Mani

Mani is the founder of an NGO working on the outskirts of Bangalore city. They are working on social and educational issues with women and children. She has a B.A., M.A. in rural sociology. She is 40, married to a well-known writer. She has a 14 year old daughter.

Interpreting the texts on being educated:

The five women participants established the notion of an educated woman through the description of their experiences on being educated. Each woman's experiences were co-constructed and co-interpreted as they narrated them and as I listened and then analysed them. They are the texts of their life as educated women told in the present. They revisited the turning points of their educational life journey, drawing upon the tensions and conflicts while traversing the path.

Viewing life from the present illuminated some experiences that were common across all five women and some that were individually different. I interpreted the experiences bringing out those commonalities and differences in the women's description of themselves as educated women. Through an examination of their texts connections were identified around experiences of their formal education and then their feelings of being educated. This interpretation was responding to the question *what and how does a woman think of herself as being an educated woman?* My interpretation of the texts was also describing the 'what' and 'how' aspect of the text, a thickening layer above the surface level of material experiences.

The turning points, marking the events and actions in life, inform each woman's experiences of being an educated woman at the present moment of her narration, assisting her to demonstrate her insights to arrive at a position of recognizing the learning and unlearning processes (Longwe, 2001) during her life's progression. This layer of interpretation identifies and then underlines the contradictions present within the texts. *Staying* with the text as an insider and an outsider as well I discuss each woman's sense of self, which is her present experience as an educated woman, the past experiences re-viewed from within each of her webs of the lived world. Firstly I examine metaphors, evocations and underlying tones of the women's texts to describe the conflicts and dilemmas that they are experiencing.

Each educated woman's sense of self is drawn from her life's discontinuities and continuities around turning points and contradictions that are marked with continued tensions and conflicts. In this second section I examine their experiences embedded in their reflections related to learning processes which the women drew upon to describe their self. Both the sections incorporate the discussion of the changing ways of the women in sensing their self. The second part of this section focuses specifically on the interpretation of women living the contradiction of an educated woman's ideal. The third part of this section discusses how the women look to the future with feelings of endings yet with a hope of a beginning which again exemplifies life's continuity amidst many discontinuities.

Metaphors and evocations of educated self

Madeleine Grumet (1992, p.29) observes, "education emerges as a metaphor for a person's dialogue with the world of his or her experience." Kanaka draws on life's 'milestones', a metaphor to express life's meandering ways with turning points; Nirmala evokes the metaphor 'masks' to represent how she deals with events and actors around her within the personal and public worlds. These masks that women wear, she points out, facilitate them to become better and ethical carers of their families, and good women in the society. On the other hand the masks are what women like Nirmala allow the world to see which her texts point out. The world, the public can see her only through those masks, sometimes catching a glimpse or some other times even catching her (Grumet, 1991, p.69) in her various personal and public roles. The masks of educated woman, working woman, a mother, a tutor to her children, a good wife and a competitive professional can also be and/or become the personal insignia of and for these women.

Rani and Vinoda treat their personal insignia with pride, with happiness, with confidence and as identities. They do not overtly talk about any masks in their life; they describe their roles, their choices of personal insignia. They identify their selves within those insignia. However their texts glimpse and register a sighting of their self outside the insignia, beyond the masks. The texts reveal the self-experiencing of the tensions, conflicts, dilemmas that are alive, operating within and behind the masks. On the other hand Nirmala and Kanaka are aware that they are seen through their masks and their self is alive behind those masks. Kanaka recognizes the deeper levels of tensions, conflicts but a surface level dilemma leading to contradictions. Nirmala not only describes them vividly with evocations but also at several points of the interview recognises the underlying tones of dilemma in continuing her educated self.

Following are some texts of Kanaka that exemplify the evoked wonderings, which in turn bring us close, into presence the meaning within the women's experiences.

**We women construct our worlds within four walls of the house...
 Nobody likes her going outside that...
 But this is different in a boy's case...
 Most of the times she is not her self...
 Where was my word?
 I kept silent; I learnt that...
 ...so this system continues.**

Kanaka has taken the boundaries metaphor deeply into her life as a philosophy. The text asserts *we women* all have boundaries. It continues to comment upon the position of girls in the present times and their educational experience. The text argues that their position even now is not better for her *going outside* is social and culturally controlled; however boys' case is different which suggests a practice of gender discrimination and also gendered nature of education being supported which Kanaka knows of as she is a teacher. All of which makes the speaker of the text continue to evoke the raw emotions of the reader especially when it says a woman *is not her self most of the times*, even if she wants to her voice is not heard which makes her adjust and compromise in everyday life keeping it a practice. Hence the *system continues*.

The questioning wonder (van Manen, 1997) around these texts begins with a question what could be the circumstances and life conditions that evoke the construction *women living within the four walls of the house*. Kanaka continues with girls' present position in receiving gender segregated education aligned with the expectations and hidden practice from the state and the society the

meaning that the text is suggesting becomes clear. The power of the evocative meaning coming through the text on silence and voice hits us with immediate presence connecting it to the metaphor of four walls, boundaries, gender segregation, discrimination and thereby possible alienation of a woman's self. This alienation is relived again in the text when it says *where was my word?* Here the self is lost within a world that is both known as well as unknown. The known world seems to be the knowledge of the system perpetuating itself, the unknown world is the unexpected reception of her family members' expectations around her identity.

Quite differently to Kanaka's, Vinoda's texts evoke strong meanings on her personal agency and then the suppression of her personal agency, which turns to acceptance, compromise leading to contradiction. The texts suggest Vinoda's growth, conflict with confrontations at some points in life then her self regrowing with a particular chosen life quality.

**So I was a bit over-conscious of our life, hardships.
There was contentment, satisfaction... I was proud, happy.
I became determined to do something more in my life and alter my life style, get education, get a job, become somebody noticeable...
Yes, I did oppose. I opposed, said I didn't want this marriage.
You know, the saying is why worry about spilt milk?
I am not demanding, don't expect him to fulfill any of my desires...**

She was conscious of economic hardships at home in her childhood, worked along as she studied which gave her happiness and contentment. This enhanced her personal agency as she recognized the power of applying economic capability. This ability enhanced and expanded her participation levels for the well-being of her family; she played a positive key role in her family affairs. Her caring for family members and responding to their feelings sympathetically continued in her later life also which actually became the source of unhappiness in connection with her marriage. The family members asked her to marry her own brother-in-law, the doing of which hurt her deeply. The unhappiness, the inability to go against family's wishes and acceptance of marriage were the most depressing moments of her life. The meaning of these experiences become vivid and clear in her words *why worry about spilt milk*, mirroring the compromising stand that a woman is told, taught which she internalizes as she grows up as the texts show. This is the assertion of life experience over the contribution of formal education, the texts point out. Vinoda insists that she uses it as her life's philosophy for the well-being of her family *yes, it teaches her adjustment, more cooperation...* More of this adjustment, cooperation and *giving more* are the qualities of an educated woman. The evoked images of an able girl who manages the harsh realities of her early

life celebrating her agency do not, as the texts show, continue in later life. As an enabled woman Vinoda does not prefer to question the injustice, which is only evoked as a sub-text, hidden within the layers of her experiences. She becomes a good family woman first.

Underlying tones within experiences

Tones reveal much deeper inner meaning about the events and actions, the texts of life, as they are viewed from the present. Without recognising tones within texts and sub-texts we may not fully 'stay' with the intensities of women's experiences that "stir us at the core of our being" as van Manen expresses (van Manen, 1997, p.364). This is evident in Rani's observation *a woman's failure in life comes only if she is not married* or Mani's text on *living within certain frames and life's realities are different*. Both women's reflections open up the possibility of the "aspect-dawning experience" (van Manen, 1997, p.363).

The conflict that Rani is experiencing arises from her position in the relational world of people, events and actions. Her constant conflict, she says, is confronting the traditional image that her brothers impose upon her at home as against her preference of having an image of a professional woman. She believes that she is 100% educated professional woman. This belief does not impact upon the attitude of her brothers or the society which regards her single unmarried status as a negative element. Rani appreciates knowing the worth of formal knowledge and using it to become a successful professional. She chooses the traditional woman's self, denying herself any opportunity of change. She does not want to step outside her familiarity comfort zone to experience the change. Her everyday dilemma, then, seems to be the confrontation between those two images – the professional and the traditional – both are in fact evoked by Rani herself in various contexts. This is her contradiction as an educated woman.

Rani's observation on the position of single women carries profound undertones of direct social and cultural influences upon a woman's personal identity. It evokes empathy towards the woman in question and turns the reader's focus towards the woman's life contexts that seem to disable her agency and label her as a failure in life. On a deeper level reading the same text again and again moves the reader's experience closer towards the woman herself: words within the text become filled with an advanced level of meaning going beyond the informational content. *A woman's failure...* is a public knowledge, a public construction and a public reality. As a

secondary understanding the text throws a question out – what makes that failure an experience for the woman to accept and live with? Rani too talks about her preference for the family feelings.

This is also the question that Vinoda's experience texts pose. Vinoda on the surface level seems to have accepted her marriage having a belief in what her sister said *...she said I would be like a son to the family, to look after my parents, without going outside the family...* This acceptance seems an easy way out of conflicts and tensions of the future. On a different level there appears to be another profound secondary meaning coming out from Vinoda's text talking about *like a son looking after parents*, not going out of the family. This meaning brings another aspect-dawn experience – a girl after marriage goes out of her parental family, which results in less investment on her prospects from the parents' side. Whereas a son who looks after his parents demands more parental investment. A son who remains with parents occupies a better respectful and rightful position in the family.

These tones, while illuminating the core experiences of the women, underline the lived experiences of the women that are ruled by different constructions of the society and the individual woman's constructions around those. These constructions control their everyday life matters and conditions over educational achievement and contribution as evident from the experiences of Vinoda and Rani. These controls govern the male and female relationships, discriminated parental investments on their children creating the gender divisions in the society which are continued. Some of the women recognize this but continue to live within such life conditions with acceptance. Whatever is the nature of this acceptance each woman has experienced it and is experiencing something in common in her everyday life – the contradictory nature of her self as an educated woman. The contradictions come along as women draw from formal education and from life experience at all the turning points of their life.

Viewing the Self as a social/traditional ideal

Elements of socialization, ethic of fulfilling familial and social expectations and internalized outcomes of formal education were included as and within the women's texts of being educated. Kanaka, Nirmala, and Rani and viewed an educated woman living the element of socialization through formal education with acceptance, acceptance with a compromised happiness factor, acceptance with a conscious critical awareness and acceptance with a choice for future action.

Something for a job, a lot for our family, children, very less for us... that is what I am as an educated woman! (Kanaka)
Our times were like that. So I believed yes, get a good job, it will get me a good husband. (Nirmala)
If I am put in such a situation with limitations because I am his wife, I don't think so I will accept that situation. (Rani)

These texts speak strongly of the image the society creates for a woman, the image that educated women internalize, the image that they are aware of and the context of their individual space, human agency within the relation frames. The acceptance of socialization and living the stereotype resonates in the sub-texts of Kanaka and Nirmala with ironical feelings, wanting to celebrate their agency but restricted in their roles with acceptance and rejection. With Kanaka allowing her husband as the decision-maker, the sub-text constructs the sense of self through internalized beliefs around male domination and female subordination and preference of remaining within and continuing the tradition of a good woman for the good society with a conscious choice.

They wanted a girl to be a house-wife. If a wife is good, if she is adjustable, peace is maintained, harmony is there. These are important.

I think of my children and husband first and go according to their needs; hardly an hour or so I keep for myself, for my own things. That is life's reality.

She manages both her work and home well. She is duty-bound ...

Drawing upon the ethic of care (Gilligan, 1991) and of fulfilling familial and social expectations to carry out their different roles Kanaka, Nirmala and Vinoda observe their experiences of putting their family first, fulfilling their roles first as wives, mothers and/or daughter-in-law. Their texts bring out the notion of an educated woman within the family becoming significantly visible and acceptable within the roles of a wife/mother and a daughter-in-law (as in Kanaka's experiences). The women's sense of self around 'preferring to understand' an educated woman as a family woman first is generated from within the beliefs and expectations around a family woman's image of fulfilling duties and responsibilities. The ethic of caring within the image of an educated woman is celebrated first by such sensing. Being told that as an educated woman she would perform the roles better and better as a 'good' wife and a 'good' mother becomes a conflicting experience to begin with. This will be internalized and accepted gradually as the sense of self from everyday life experiences grows, as the woman becomes a family woman first. Then contradictory experience with which she has to live with a conscious awareness emerges and continues. This is reiterated differently by the women. It becomes *certainly* a tension and a

conflict for a young woman who is *receiving* education for acquisition of knowledge, enhancement in her abilities, to develop her worldview and to be an educated woman.

Torn between: The contradiction of an educated woman

Something specific coming from the women's experiences is the contradiction that they are/were facing as a tension in everyday life between their growing sense of self, its reconstruction and how others view them in their relational world. The contradiction is of choosing to live the traditional good woman image, the view that others want the women to carry on. Leaving little space for changes, this conflicting space provides an expanded ground for a better and deeper understanding of the various external forces impacting upon the self, experiencing inner tensions and conflicts. This interpretation provides a better lens to examine the experiences of women's power, position, identity, and personal development.

The intended goal of formal education, as many academic studies stress upon, should remove many dominant discourses in everyday life, empowering each person with an enhanced agency. Especially so for women. As independent agents women should be able to express their choices and preferences without apprehension of not being within boundaries or hesitation of following the tradition. Celebrating personal human agency takes a person beyond the boundaries, masks and the stereotype. They remain "autonomous, purposive actors, capable of choice" with their agency expressed both in public and private domains of life (Lister, 1997, pp.36-37). What is prominently noticeable from the women's experiences is their choice of remaining within the frames of acceptance and rejection. This choice in turn is related to the various levels of contradictory experiences such as the torn between experience and the conflicts.

Imagining the future self: Contradiction continues

Can women like Kanaka, Nirmala decide to live outside boundaries without masks? Can Rani and Vinoda change their situations related their marriage aspect? Will Mani, as an activist, think differently about life's frames?

The women, while looking to the future, drew both similar and different images of an educated woman with turning points. Growth of her self for Kanaka is having peaceful moments in life with a satisfaction that she has done her duties as a good family woman for the well-being of her

husband and children. Thus continuing her existing self she hopes a better future for her daughters. Even then she observes that the society does not change for some time. Which could mean that the contradictions of educated women might continue. Nirmala is determined that she will allow her children space to experience the meaning of what they are learning formally. She is also determined that she will create opportunities of learning for her own self-growth. However she believes that *99% women live wearing such masks. Just when they come to the realisation that they are not true to themselves, they slip into sleep. Then get up once again in the morning, put on that balancing mask again and continue your life... that is life for women here.* The experience immediately recognizes the continuity of contradiction – reshaping her sense of self, re-experiencing her learning are suspended in a conflicting space where the impact of education and the reality of everyday life spiral. She also hopes that one day all this may change. However the sense of self, its growth looking to the future is expressed differently in the texts of Mani. Mani is aware that women live within frames – *our ways are binding; we are socially bound ... we get tied down by numerous things in life.* She prefers to recognize herself as a woman living the everyday ordinary person's life.

Practicing the image of educated woman as a purposive, autonomous agent in everyday life can be damaging as she wants to live the normal life. Which raises the question what is normal life of an Indian woman? Chanana's (2001, p.20) observation about the rigid elements of the culture, society's preference of following the tradition partially looks at this question. Normal life itself is a web of several webs, social, political, cultural, traditional and economic. These forces expect the women remain deeply rooted in culture and tradition (Talbani, 2001). Mani's preference of remaining as an ordinary woman in normal life reflects the contradiction of what she learnt from education and what she prefers to be. Her choice is towards this normal life of the stereotype. The choice is to remain and live within the comfort zone. Living outside this comfort zone may be too risky, threatening and insecure. What do women need in everyday life to face this risk, threat and insecurity, which actually could lead towards a change in the society? Is it just education for empowerment and agency? The argument² related to providing and enhancing basic education to girls and women is in place now, at least theoretically. However the necessity of an education that is inclusive of, and teaching, girls and women to develop a firm positive attitude towards personal choices, personal agency for changing their life conditions still needs focus and deliberation.

² Sen (1999, 2005) has been campaigning this and influencing the governances within India and across the world. However, the question of basic education to girls and only through educated women can the country progress goes beyond, questioning the development of personal agency within and among women.

The next section pays particular attention to this necessity of providing an education that is inclusive of building women's capacities for change and action.

Actionable Space

For women, in the context of this research the experience of being educated entails different experiences in their internal and external space. They felt confident as educated women but their experiences revealed that the expression of confidence is restricted within both internal and external space. They said as educated women they could do what they wanted to do but their experiences pointed out that they are compromising and adjusting within their internal and external space. The space of living as a traditional, educated woman in Indian society entails the choice of the educated woman to be so, as the participants' experiences showed.

Space is the most powerful experience in women's everyday lived world, having both actual and metaphorical existence. This actual and metaphorical space entails an expression of agency in the everyday lived experience, the assumed and the actual characteristic of an educated woman's life.

This characteristic includes the constant negotiations that educated women initiate in their private and public domains, with a knitting of confidence, contradictions, conflicts and dilemmas. They are, being educated, confident of taking action, having such an awareness about action. An action and a change towards their well-being, using their education for their happiness, for their identity as themselves; not carrying on their educated status for others. They desire a change through concerted action. However, they choose not to initiate an action towards change in their accepted traditional life. The contradiction of not taking an action or initiating a change for their well-being raises conflicts and dilemmas. Thus the vast space that exists in their life becomes an interplay of confidence and contradiction, awareness of action and inability of acting. Thus this space becomes their *Actionable Space*.

The term '*Actionable*' draws on the meaning of ability to act towards an effect, which also denotes a change in an existing condition. Integrating the two separate words action and able and the various meanings associated with them together the term puts forth a meaning of a condition having enough power to do something.

Drawing upon this integrated meaning, the term *Actionable Space* provides a ground for the description of a space in which educated women are in a condition, a position, having enough power to do something. They are capable of producing a desirable effect to alter their condition. They have the power to act towards a change in their private and public domains of life.

Actionable Space as the construct

Actionable Space is a conceptual space that has its value in ideological condition as well as an actual concrete space relating to the everyday expression of educated women's agency.

The first character of this space, having its value in ideological condition, is held in its essence by the contradiction explicated by Martin (1991) who discusses the contradictory nature of the ideal of an educated woman. The latter character of this space, having its value in the everyday agency of educated women, is accentuated by Pateman's (1988, 1989) notion of power asymmetries and sexual differences and Longwe's (2001) delineation of women's learning and unlearning experiences.

This contradiction and conflict is related to each participant's acceptance and resistance of their traditionally expected roles. Each participant, while narrating her experience of being an educated woman, brings to the surface, the need, her desire and her dilemma of being educated. Thus each participant's lived experiences of need, desire and dilemma, mirroring the deeply felt but unshared contradiction and conflict of being educated lead to a Space, which identifies and locates them clearly. The experiences of being educated women are situated in the locations, i.e., Space, that are political, economic, social, cultural, religious environments that are external in relation to position which in turn is associated with power in relations and control; they are situated in the internal locations as well such as psychological in relation to self and identity.

Thus, the ideal of an educated woman (Martin 1991) who constantly learns to feel educated and unlearns that feeling to remain a stereotype (Longwe 1999) can be located in the space of action and inaction. A space where in educated women, being capable of taking action, can take action but decide not to. They choose not to initiate action to bring in a change to any situation of unhappiness and discomfort. This choice, their decision to remain traditional Indian women and then an educated woman may originate from two sources of experiences related to their position in everyday life: they find comfort in carrying on and agree within themselves the well-

recognized, role-performing image of a woman; secondly they may carry on their traditional role performance living the contradiction in everyday life, wanting a change but not acting towards it in the uncomfortable, uneasy feeling of facing a negative consequence. Both cases, based on this study's participants' experiences, point out the conflict and dilemma – that they accept their position internally, but recognize externally the male hegemony and the socio-cultural structure for their traditional role-performance. This acceptance is a lived experiences in the light of the knowledge of being capable of resisting the image. Thus, the space, characterized by the ability of the educated woman to take action, is already existing and available to them, but remains unutilized or partially utilized for her own well-being. Their choice of not utilizing or under-utilizing the 'Actionable Space' originates from their position and personal stands associated with their different relationship with their traditional identity and their being educated identity.

Enabling possibilities of Actionable Space

Actionable Space illustrates and illuminates an apprehension, but also clearly reveals the space for possible action. It shows the prohibition and the resulting inhibition yet upholds a determined attempt for a positive action to change the situation/attitude. It is a spectrum of experiences, involving, including fear and hope, prohibition, inhibition, negation, with action overpowering them; the Space engages itself with the dilemma, contradiction; potentially its celebrates the knowledge, the skills, the identity of educated women as confident independent women, having positive relations with their family and peers, not alienating themselves within their society.

Actionable Space resonates the dilemmatic feeling of an educated woman as it provides a space for her self to be. It also supplies locations for her fuller agency. Contrary to the internalized 'this is your place', *Actionable Space* is *her own* space, without the feeling of inhibition, exclusion or the otherness.

Conclusion

The central focus of this paper is to learn what is the experience of being an educated woman in Indian society and to describe those experiences, with multi-levels of interpretation. Girls' desire to be somebody else, the other to keep up some family's name, which later becomes women's too, consists of a constant shift in their stands and viewpoints in relation to 'I am educated; I am able to do what I want to do for my life'.

As adults and having to deal with their everyday worlds differently educated women learn to apply their education in different ways, with a specific awareness of their position and self. This awareness may be termed as educated women becoming educated. This is indicative of two directional flows of being educated women: one is that they grow more confident of themselves in their expression of agency in everyday life circumstances; another is that they emerge out as more stable women in their relationships with other people. This stage, representing these two directional flows, may be termed as the most crucial stage of an educated woman's dilemma.

This dilemma is reflective with a much stronger sense – they wish for changes in their children's life through formal education, while they themselves retain the traditional image even as educated women. Their choice, arising from the contradiction of being educated and the dilemma of being an educated woman, at the same time desiring to become an educated woman, must become the base for a change and reform in how girls' and women's educational experiences need to be viewed. Such a base with changes in attitudes and perceptions may influence future educational policies and practices. A concerted effort for such a change will bring result in real empowerment of girls and women.

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