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Gendered conditions of higher education access: advancing a gender prism analytic through the case of Haryana, India

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that a holistic, nuanced analytical framework for analysing gender and access to higher education (HE) would be of great benefit to the field, especially in an era where many country contexts are declaring that gender inequalities in HE access are solved due to the use of the gender parity index (GPI) as a measure of success. As such, this article proposes a framework to analyse gendered conditions of access to HE, referring to the various ways in which young people of different genders arrive in HE but with different gendered backgrounds behind them and different gendered expectations of their futures ahead of them, even when they were born into the same families and communities. Drawing on feminist sociological and poststructuralist thinking, the proposed framework promotes a refractive perspective to unpack the varied gendered influences that shape young people's educational trajectories. The article illustrates the framework with the case of the north-Indian state of Haryana, based on an in-depth mixed-methods empirical study of gendered HE access in government colleges. The analysis reveals enduring gendered disparities that are otherwise masked by the use of GPI, including gendered differences in the perceived purpose of HE for young people, which results in differentiated prioritisation of e.g. quality of institution or subject choice. The article aims to provide future studies in this area with a framework that can be applied in and beyond the Indian context.

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Introduction

Higher education (HE) access has been researched in relation to gender in different ways and various contexts over the years of the development of the international research field on HE and gender. Gender is known to play out in terms of subject and course choice and choice of institution (Jüttler & Schumann, 2019; Welsh, 2020). Often, gender is considered as a contributing factor in analyses of social class or other forms of social marginalisation

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such as ethnicity (Ball et al., 2002; Espinoza & González, 2013). Where gender is foregrounded, it is often discussed in a relatively narrow way, and may not draw on the rich theorisations of gender from the women's and gender studies field (David, 2009; Henderson, 2019; Leathwood & Read, 2009). Specifically, research in this area tends to proceed with the naturalised assumption that gender affects HE access. Because this eventuality is taken for granted, there is a risk of reinforcing essentialised understandings of gender which construct particular behaviours and outcomes as naturally associated with gender identities. In this article we present and illustrate an analytical framework which takes account of the complex and nuanced interplay between gender and the conditions of HE access, i.e. the circumstances that frame the eventual entry of a student into HE (Henderson et al., 2024a). Thus we unpack HE access as a gendered social process.

The framework was developed from – and in this article is illustrated through – a study of gender and HE access and choice in the state of Haryana, India (Henderson et al., 2021). India has the second largest HE system in the world and the HE system has been declared to be in the massification stage (Varghese, 2015), with a GER (Gross Enrolment Rate) of 27.1 in 2019–2020 (MoE, 2020). Having reached gender parity of enrolment in undergraduate education for the first time in 2018–2019, with the proportion of women students exceeding men students in various locations and institutions (MHRD, 2019), gender is now seen as a less urgent equality issue in India, with enduring issues of social marginalisation and deprivation prioritised in the New Education Policy 2020 (MHRD, 2020). Arguably, the gender parity landmark does not constitute the end of the need for gender analysis of HE access in India – and other contexts where gender parity has already been achieved. Rather, there is a need to observe ongoing inequalities in HE access and choice which are masked by the generic measure of the gender parity index (GPI) (Henderson et al., 2024a).

Haryana is situated within North India, on the border of the national capital, Delhi. Haryana does not have a long or renowned history of HE, as the state was maintained as an agricultural state during British rule (Chowdhry, 2011; Mittal, 1986), but nowadays enrolment in HE is above the national average (GER 29.3 – MoE, 2020). Haryana presents an interesting conundrum, where the GPI for undergraduate enrolment is higher than the national average (MoE, 2020). However, Haryana is also known as a highly patriarchal state, with a skewed sex ratio (Census, 2011) (meaning that female foeticide and infanticide occur) and high levels of control over women and violence against women (particularly women from lower caste groups) (Chowdhry, 2011). There are also low and *declining* rates of women's workforce participation (Himanshi & Rajeshwari, 2021), which contradict the received notion that higher levels of education result in higher women's workforce participation. Haryana lends itself to an analysis of how gender equality measures can conceal persistent inequalities in norms and practices.

In this article, we use the term “HE access” to encompass multiple and inextricably linked decisions that include the decision to apply for HE or take another path, as well as the notion of HE choice (Reay et al., 2005) which includes decisions about which course or institution to apply to. The article proposes an approach to analysing gendered HE access that is both contextually specific and more widely applicable in principle to the Indian national context and beyond. The key question that the paper addresses is, *how are the conditions of HE access gendered?* The question focuses on gender, with recognition of the ways in which intersecting axes of dis/advantage play a significant role in gendered

relations. The paper proceeds through a literature review section exploring the field of gender and HE access, specifically identifying references to *conditions of access*. The following section sets out the theoretical underpinnings of the analytical framework, which we refer to as a gender prism, succeeded by a section that presents the empirical study. The subsequent section presents the application of the analytical framework to the case of Haryana, followed by a discussion and conclusion section. Overall, the paper aims to further open up questions of gender and access to HE precisely at a moment where gender inequalities in HE access are often portrayed as being solved.

Tracing gendered conditions of HE access in the access literature

Gendered conditions of HE access are “gendered inequalities that precede and underlie enrolment” which mean that “people entering HE do not arrive at HE in the same ways” (Henderson et al., 2024a, p. 101). In this section, we explore ways in which conditions of access are referred to in HE access literature that discusses gender, and, because this article seeks to contribute to the international field of research on HE access, we incorporate discussions of literature across several country contexts, including but not limited to India. As noted in the introduction, we deploy a concept of HE access that incorporates the inextricably linked notions of access and choice, meaning that, in the following discussion, we engage with literature that could be classified as one or the other or both. The section explores how conditions of access are referred to, and how gender is implicated. From our literature reviewing, we established three categories of condition: background, decision-making processes and rationale. We discuss each category in turn.

Background

Within “background”, we refer to students’ pre-HE conditions, including students’ families’ educational and employment backgrounds, as well as their educational experiences preceding HE. Students’ backgrounds are frequently discussed in the literature on gender and HE access, but are often related to other intersecting axes of inequality. For instance, in a study on the school leaver survey and gendered HE choices in Germany (Lörz et al., 2011), the authors controlled for whether students’ parents had attended HE or not, as a potential determinant of students’ own choices; the parental unit was not disaggregated by gender. In a study of gender and HE choice in Spain (Garcia-Andreu et al., 2020), on the other hand, the authors discussed that, in families with mothers who were highly educated, there was an expectation that daughters would follow suit. We also found that parental employment was discussed, such as in a study of determinants of HE access and subject choice in India by Chakrabarti (2009), but again this was often taken as a marker of socio-economic status rather than seen as particularly relevant to gender; again, in this paper the parental unit was not disaggregated by gender. In terms of students’ prior educational backgrounds, schooling histories were referred to in the literature, for example in relation to subject choices in school and then HE. For instance, in a study on gender and the selection of economics as a subject of study choice in Switzerland (Jüttler & Schumann, 2019), gendered prior attainment in a subject was seen as a potential influence on HE subject choice. The differentiation between families’ investment

in sons' and daughters' schooling type has also appeared in studies of India (Gautam, 2015) and Peru (Guerrero & Rojas, 2020). From these examples, which are typical of the literature on gender and HE access, we can see that background factors are often touched upon but may not be directly related to gender, and may not be fully expanded upon.

Decision-making processes

"Decision-making processes" refers to the ways in which decisions about HE access are taken, including who is involved in making the decision and what their involvement in the process may be (Thomas, 2021; Thomas & Henderson, 2022). Family members, particularly parents, appear in the literature as contributing to decision making about HE access. For instance, the abovementioned study about HE choice in Spain (Garcia-Andreu et al., 2020) discusses the role of parents in encouraging their daughters towards what are perceived as more masculine, lucrative subjects and dissuading their sons from subjects that are viewed as feminine, which is also echoed in Gautam's (2015) study of gender and subject choice in India. A study in Lucknow, India, by Verma (2014) indicates that parents were actively choosing single-gender HE colleges for their daughters. In Hoskins and Wong's (2022) study of working-class British Asian women's HE access and experience, mothers are seen as influential – but not necessarily in a practical sense – as they encourage their daughters to access HE so as to guarantee life choices and financial stability that they themselves had not experienced. On the other hand, in Cooper's (2013) study of middle-class mother-daughter HE decision making in England, mothers appeared as highly agentic across fields of decision making. A study of women's HE access in Bengaluru, India, showcases an instance where a mother sold her jewellery to support her daughter's access to HE (Sahu et al., 2017). A study by Myklebust (2019) on women's choice of "gender-untypical" HE subjects in Norway includes the fact that the students' mothers and friends showed resistance to the students' subject choices. From these examples, we can see that parents are commonly discussed in relation to gender and HE decision-making processes, but we rarely gain an insight into exactly how decisions were taken, and the range of people involved.

Rationale

By "rationale" we refer to the basis upon which decisions about HE access are made; this includes future-oriented thinking on the part of the student and also those who have an influence on the student's life choices, in relation to their future lives, including their role in the family and their intended employment/occupation. Rationale feeds into decision making because it involves considerations of the *purpose of HE* for different gendered notions of the future. Some previous studies have recognised gendered rationales for HE, such as where women students are thought to be more risk-averse about their futures than men (Lörz et al., 2011; Strecker & Feixa, 2020). Men are thought to be more likely to be thinking about lucrative careers when making HE decisions (Lörz et al., 2011) or at least planning for future financial requirements (Burke, 2011), or their families are planning for their future financial contribution to the family economy (Gautam, 2015). In a study of gendered access to HE in Peru, families chose to invest in young men's HE rather than

young women's to prioritise men's future earnings (Guerrero & Rojas, 2020). Women are constructed in society as future mothers and caregivers (Hinton-Smith et al., 2018; Myklebust, 2019), which impacts on HE choices, while men may be considered as future fathers without this impacting upon HE choices (Myklebust, 2019). Thus, the rationale for students' decisions to access HE seems to be rooted in gendered expectations of future roles in the family and in society.

This section has presented an analysis of how conditions that surround HE access are referred to in the literature on gender and HE access, mapping the categories of background, decision-making processes and rationale. While extant literature has provided the foundation for analysing gendered conditions of access, often these conditions are referred to in passing or may not be analysed in a comprehensive manner, or indeed may be taken as indicators of other axes of disadvantage than gender. Having set out the analytical framework followed by the presentation of the empirical study, these categories of conditions are explored further in the findings section.

Gender prism

The international literature on HE access often refers to gender, but the extent to which gender features as a focus and the ways in which gender is operationalised as a concept vary widely (Leathwood & Read, 2009). This section introduces the dominant constructions of gender in this field of research, and moves on to present the gender prism approach which is adopted in this article.

It is common in studies on access to HE for gender to be analysed as a variable among others, often in studies which focus on social disadvantage as a key lens and then consider a range of contributing factors (e.g. Espinoza & González, 2013; Menon et al., 2017; Rayner & Papakonstantinou, 2020; Wadhwa, 2018). In this group of studies, the construction of gender often takes the form of what is effectively a naturalised *cause of differences* between subject choices or HE access rates. A second common group of studies explores gender (often alongside another variable such as social class or migrant status) by comparing differences between men and women in relation to different aspects of HE access (Ayalon & Mcdossi, 2019; Strecker & Feixa, 2020). In these studies, there is also an emphasis on gender as having a naturalised influence on people's lives and educational decision making. However, there is a greater foregrounding of gender in these studies than the first group. A third common type of study focuses on women as a disadvantaged group and explores the particular conditions and experiences that women face in accessing HE (e.g. Gautam, 2015; Hoskins & Wong, 2022; Sahu et al., 2017; Welsh, 2020). With these studies, the construction of gender focuses on the already-assumed differences of women's experiences (from men's experiences). Because these studies start with the assumption of women's difference from men, men often serve as a silent comparator (Henderson et al., 2024b). The above three types of study (gender as one variable in many; gender as a comparison between women and men; gender as women's experience) are by far the most common constructions of gender in research on HE access. It is proportionately less common to find studies exploring men's experiences and/or how dominant constructions of masculinity intersect with HE access (for an example, see Burke, 2011). Some studies of LGBTQ+, queer, non-binary and trans students' HE access exist (Cook, 2002; Marine, 2017; Mary, 2023; Squire & Mobley, 2015), which

challenge some of the naturalised and binarised gender norms of the field, but there is not necessarily theoretical cross-pollination with studies that do not encompass these student groups/identities.

This article sets out a gender prism approach to analysing gendered conditions of HE access. The elaboration in this article draws on and then advances our initial presentation of the gender prism elsewhere (Henderson et al., 2024a), by engaging in a comprehensive application of the analytical framework in relation to conditions of access. The gender prism approach is rooted in a feminist sociological framing, in that structural concerns are foregrounded, and it takes a post-structural orientation that seeks to denaturalise consolidated gender norms of femininity and masculinity. The prism promotes a refractive perspective that seeks to diversify the angles from which we approach conditions of HE access. The gender prism comprises three principal facets. (i) Firstly, that, rather than being a purely physical or biological attribute, gender is socially interpreted in terms of femininity and masculinity (Connell, 2002). This does not mean that gender does not have a biological basis, but rather that biological appearances, intertwined with outward signifiers of gender identity, lead to the formation and ascribing of gender identity, which then becomes naturalised and yet also shifts over space and time (Butler, 1993, 1999 [1990]). (ii) Secondly, rather than seeing gender as a static, individualised state that can be claimed or owned (Connell, 2002; Butler, 1999 [1990]), gender is a social practice where other gendered individuals – and ourselves – constantly engage in interpreting and ascribing gender through actions, gestures, words. This means that any individual is not entirely in control of their gender, which is always open to mismatch and misrecognition based on others' interpretations, resulting in both deliberate and involuntary gender transgression (Rasmussen, 2009). (iii) Finally, gender as a social process is located in social contexts; a useful term for describing the social foundation of gender norms is "gender regime" (Connell, 1991 [1987]; Connell & Pearse, 2015). Gender regimes underpin gender norms of femininity and masculinity, and are manifested through the ascribing of gender as discussed in the first and second aspects of the prism. Patriarchy often shores up gender regimes (Connell, 1991 [1987]), where the privileging of men's interests results in gender inequalities. In many Indian societies, including in Haryana, a patrifocal regime is exercised (Mukhopadhyay & Seymour, 1994), where the family revolves around the location of the man, who remains attached to and responsible for the natal home, while women are expected to move to their marital home after marriage (Chowdhry, 2011; Thomas, 2021).

The three aspects of the gender prism unsettle essentialising logics pertaining to gendered conditions of HE access because they encourage an analysis which goes deeper into the ways in which gendered patterns and transgressions emerge, often through subtle means that are masked by homogenising indicators such as the GPI. The gender prism (i) unfixes gender from biological sex, encouraging a social reading of how HE access is gendered in terms of femininity and masculinity; (ii) the prism also unfixes gender from individuals, reconstituting it as a social process of interpretation and ascription; (iii) the prism recognises that gender norms are neither universal nor a free-for-all, but rather that there are contextual gender regimes operating at a structural level which shape both gender norms of femininity and masculinity and scope for gender transgression. For a visual representation of the analytical framework, see [Figure 1](#).

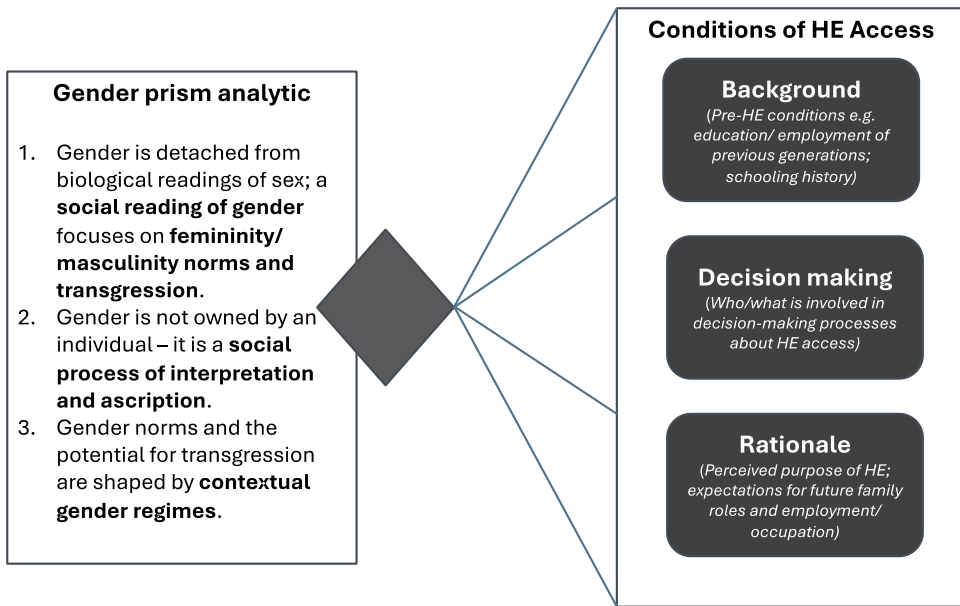


Figure 1. Analytical framework for analysing the gendered conditions of HE access (source: Authors).

The empirical study

The study from which the paper draws was a five-year research project (2017–2021) entitled “A Fair Chance for Education: Gendered Pathways to Educational Success in Haryana” (www.warwick.ac.uk/haryana), funded by the Fair Chance Foundation (Stewart et al., 2022). This article is based on Phase 1 of the project (hereafter referred to as “the study”), an exploratory mixed methods study which aimed to map the gendered terrain of HE access and choice in Haryana (Henderson et al., 2021; Henderson et al., 2024b). Data collection took place in 2018. The study adopted a mixed methods case study approach where the same methods were employed in two equivalent government colleges in two geographically distant districts of Haryana, Sonipat and Mahendragarh. Government colleges were selected as key sites for the wider project as they provide low-cost, localised, mainly undergraduate HE and are therefore selected by many first generation HE entrants (Tierney & Sabharwal, 2016). Government colleges often offer three standard degree pathways (sometimes fewer) comprising Arts (BA), Commerce (BCom) and Sciences (BSc). HE colleges – including publicly-funded, publicly-supported (known as “private-aided” or “government-aided”) and private – offer the majority of undergraduate provision in India (ibid.). Colleges are affiliated to universities. Both colleges were co-educational and were located in small urban centres. Sonipat is proximate to the border with Delhi in an area of relatively high economic and infrastructural development. Mahendragarh is at the opposite side of the state, is more rural and borders with Rajasthan. The colleges are pseudonymised as SDC (Sonipat District College) and MDC (Mahendragarh District College). The opportunity to add a further college (questionnaire survey only, also in 2018) arose in preparation for Phase 2 of the project. This college (pseudonym: SiDC, Sirsa District College) was located in a relatively rural district of Sirsa with a high proportion of marginalised caste

groups and bordering on Punjab. The study design is represented in Table 1; all data collection was conducted in person at the colleges.

The study received ethical approval from the University of Warwick. Ethical issues that were considered included anonymizing the sampled colleges and ensuring privacy for the interviews and FGDs (Focus Group Discussions); all participants received a briefing (verbal and printed) about the project before signing written consent forms. The instruments were piloted by members of the project's Consultative Group and were tweaked to clarify some of the questions. Data collection was implemented by the research team with additional research assistance support. The questionnaire was administered in a bilingual form (English-Hindi), and the interviews were conducted almost exclusively in Hindi. The audio transcripts were transcribed in Hindi (Roman script) and then translated into English in a parallel format. The full study information and findings can be found in Henderson et al. (2021). The analysis process is summarised in Table 1. The initial thematic coding and analysis of the transcripts was conducted inductively to map the different aspects of HE access, and deductively to establish how gender was discussed (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). For the purposes of this paper, the conceptual framework was applied to re-examine the transcripts and guide further analysis of the survey data. In particular, the second wave of analysis was conducted to identify gender norms and transgressions, ways in which an individual's gender was ascribed by others, normalised expectations of gendered individuals, and so on, according to the gender prism analytic set out in the previous section.

Table 1. Summary of data collection methods.

Method and Information	Sample	Analysis	Data identification
Paper questionnaire administered with undergraduate students. (Note: students were asked to record their gender identity; no gender identities other than man and woman were recorded percentages are provided based on valid responses)	MDC: 124 (16% women, 84% men) SDC: 118 (66.4% women, 33.6% men) SiDC: 84 (47.6% women, 52.4% men)	Entered into SPSS, descriptive analysis; thematic analysis of free text answers.	E.g. "SDC:9103" refers to SDC college, respondent ID 9103
Semi-structured qualitative interviews with men and women undergraduate students, on students' HE journeys and views on HE.	SDC: 2 women, 2 men MDC: 2 women, 2 men	Preliminary analysis in a team workshop, construction of HE profiles of each student, thematic analysis.	E.g. "MDC.Int.M.2" refers to MDC college, interview, man student participant 2. W = woman student participant
Semi-structured FGDs (Focus Group Discussions) with groups of men and women undergraduate students discussing issues connected with gendered HE access and choice.	SDC: 1 × 5 women, 1 × 5 men MDC: 1 × 5 women, 1 × 5 men	Thematic analysis.	E.g. "MDC.FGD.M.2" refers to MDC college, FGD, man student participant 2. W = woman student participant
Semi-structured interviews with a key member of college personnel in each college, to understand about the college context. (Note: both men)	SDC: 1 MDC: 1	Thematic analysis.	(Not referred to in this article)

Gendered conditions of HE access in Haryana, India

In this section, the gender prism is applied to the empirical material from the study; the analysis is organised into the categories of HE access conditions, building on the literature section. This provides the structure for the exploration of ways in which HE access conditions are seen to be gendered in multi-faceted ways (Figure 1).

Background

As discussed in the literature section, the educational and employment background of students is often touched upon in the literature on gender and HE access, but may not be specifically linked with gender and may not be fully elaborated upon. An exception was the study where daughters whose mothers were highly educated were expected to maintain the same status (Garcia-Andreu et al., 2020). This section draws on the student survey data to report on students' backgrounds. Interpreting the empirical material from the Haryana study through the prism analytic led us to explore the gendered implications of previous generations' educational levels and employment types. Parental education and employment are revelatory of gender dynamics within families, especially where there are stark differences between women and men in heterosexual unions that are heavily embedded in naturalised binary gender norms of femininity and masculinity. Within the same family unit, which would normally be classed as having a shared socio-economic status, there may be stark differences at an intra-household level, which create different gendered expectations for different gendered individuals of the next generation (Bora, 2024). In our study, we found that, while many students had no multi-generational history of formal schooling in their families, it was more common for the higher level of educational attainment to have been achieved by the men in the family, and often the discrepancy was substantial, including husbands who had completed high school or beyond, whose wives had not completed primary school (see Figure 2). Across the three colleges, the majority of students' grandmothers (maternal and paternal) had not completed any years of formal schooling, including primary, which was not the case for grandfathers (see Figure 2). Across all three colleges, no students' grandmothers and 15 mothers had attended HE, in comparison with 24 grandfathers and 43 fathers. This picture of highly inscribed gender difference is further emphasised by the survey data on employment background. While no respondents' fathers were home-makers, adhering to masculine breadwinner norms, the vast majority of students' mothers were home-makers (92.7% of valid responses across the three colleges), irrespective of their educational attainment; only 16 respondents listed other occupations for their mothers. On the other hand, there was already a strong context set for young men entering the workforce. The most common forms of employment for fathers were farming, business, manual labour, skilled/technical labour, civil service, meaning that there was little precedent in terms of graduate employment, but there was a clear gendered expectation of men's workforce participation. In sum, due to gendered access to education in previous generations, daughters are making a greater generational leap than sons by accessing HE, which is as a result seen as more controversial and even transgressive in terms of gendered expectations of educational attainment (Henderson et al., 2024a). Moreover, there may be inherited femininity-inscribed expectations for young women to stay within the home and family

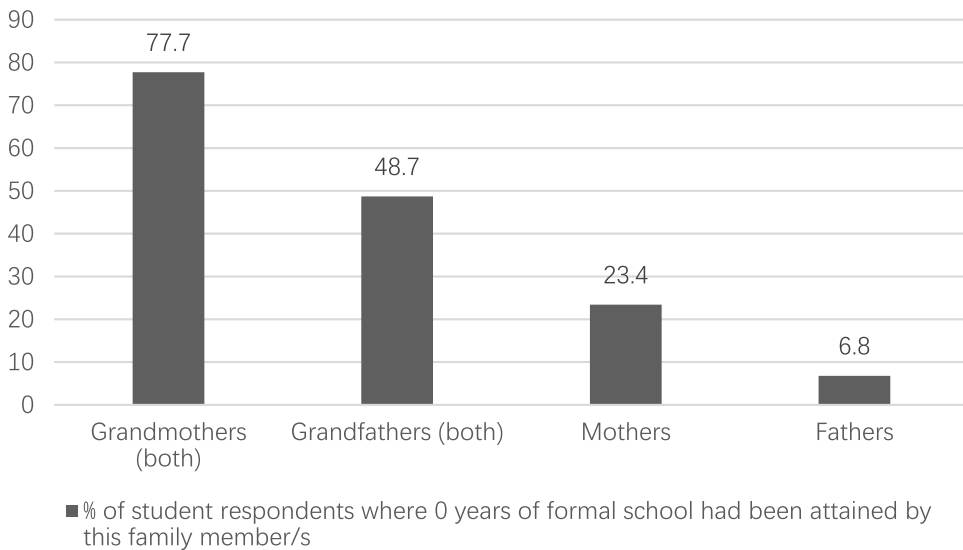


Figure 2. Gendered levels of educational attainment in previous generations (Source: Authors).

after completing education (Himanshi & Rajeshwari, 2021), meaning that the quality of their education is potentially less highly valued than men's, given that men are expected to obtain qualifications and enter the workforce.

Exploring students' own pre-HE educational background also reveals clear trends showing differentiated investment in schooling for sons and daughters, indicating how families ascribe gender norms to their offspring. This is important, given the different standards of provision between under-funded government schools and private schooling in India (Narwana, 2019). Respondents indicated on the questionnaire whether they attended private, government or other school type for the four main phases of schooling in India (primary, lower secondary, upper secondary, high school). In our survey sample, more women started and remained in government schools than men and more men started and remained in private schools than women (see Figure 3). Men were more likely to have accessed private schooling than their sisters (see Figure 3). Young women were growing up in households where their brothers were often attending fee-paying schools, according to masculinity-inscribed norms of investment in sons, while they themselves were attending publicly-funded education (see also Verma, 2014), creating a gendered divide within the current generation in terms of investment and quality of education – and therefore preparedness for HE study.

Overall, this analysis of background paints a picture where societal gender norms in previous generations mean that young people are growing up in households where they see differentiated gender roles and norms playing out in terms of education and employment, and see their parents making different schooling choices based on the gender of their children. Even while all the students in our study had successfully accessed HE, it was clear that there were highly differentiated *conditions of access* at play.

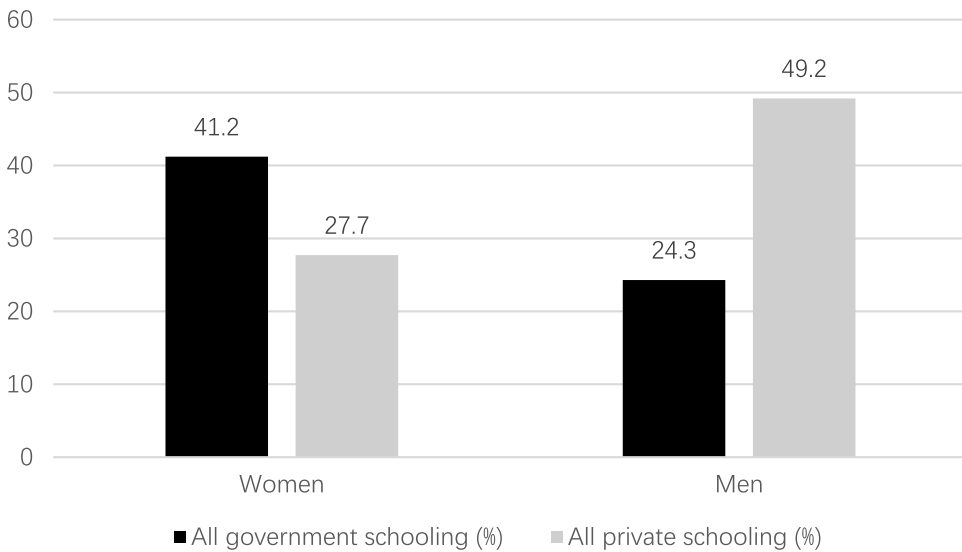


Figure 3. Gendered patterns of schooling type (government/private) (Source: Authors).

Decision making

The literature section discussed that parents are often involved in making decisions about HE access, but with little sense of how the gender dynamics played out. In this section, we illustrate gendered decision making about HE access using data from the survey and interviews and FGDs with students. A first point to make here is that, where women are less educated than their husbands in heterosexual unions, the decision-making power of the husband is enhanced, particularly in relation to the masculine-ascribed public domain, into which education falls (Chowdhry, 2011). Decision making about HE access follows gendered family dynamics, and is a reflection of the gender regime, where gender norms play out based on naturalised binary interpretations of what is appropriate for young women (norms of femininity) and young men (norms of masculinity). While much of the literature on HE access constructs young people as autonomous decision makers, perhaps with the voices of their family and friends in the background (e.g. Myklebust, 2019), it is noteworthy that many students in this study, especially young women, did not make their own HE choices; these decisions were often taken by fathers and/or brothers (Thomas, 2021; see also Gautam, 2015). As one participant (MDC.FGD.W.3) noted, “we did not choose our own college” (see also Verma, 2014). In some more extreme cases, fathers and/or brothers went to the colleges to enrol women students without the women present, even taking the decision to change the subject of study in the process. Our study found across data sources that fathers were perceived as having more influence than mothers on the decision to pursue HE study, and that this also shifted depending on the gender of the student. The survey showed that the influence of fathers on women students’ decisions to apply for HE was only slightly greater than their mothers across the colleges (see Figure 4) unlike for men students, where mothers were seen as less influential. The role of the father in making decisions about HE emerged in the qualitative data, where a participant stated, “My father ...

knows everything about how others think [about educational decisions and so on] and behaves with us according to this" (SDC.FGD.W.1). Accounts of mothers' involvement in decision-making echo Hoskins and Wong's (2022) study, where mothers in British Asian families encouraged their daughters to avail of opportunities that they themselves were unable to access. According to expected norms of enhanced masculine power within sibling sets (Chowdhry, 2011), across both women and men students, brothers¹ were cited by more student survey respondents than sisters as having been influential on the decision to apply for HE (see Figure 4). For women, members of the extended family emerged as important influences to assist with decision making (see also Thomas, 2021). For one participant (SDC.FGD.W.3), her paternal aunt had been influential. The aunt was a school teacher, and had told her she should go to college; for another participant (MDC.Int.W.1), her paternal uncle's daughter was influential as she was a professor at one of the universities in Haryana. In terms of other relatives, these seemed to play less of a role for young men than for young women as seen in the qualitative data, but one participant (SDC.Int.M.1) said that his paternal grandfather told him to study, and that he would take care of the farm with the parents.

In sum, decision making about HE access as a socially enacted process where gender norms play out emerged as gendered in terms of the extent to which young women were able to make decisions, as opposed to fathers and brothers deciding (Chowdhry, 2011). Women's decision making about HE was influenced by both parents, with fathers emerging as slightly more influential than mothers, and brothers more than sisters, with additional guidance from extended family members. However, the nature of the influence differed, with fathers and brothers in the position to make final decisions and even go to enrol the student in the college and course of their (and not the student's) choosing, while mothers were providing encouragement rather than necessarily being able to influence the final decision, according to femininity norms within families (see

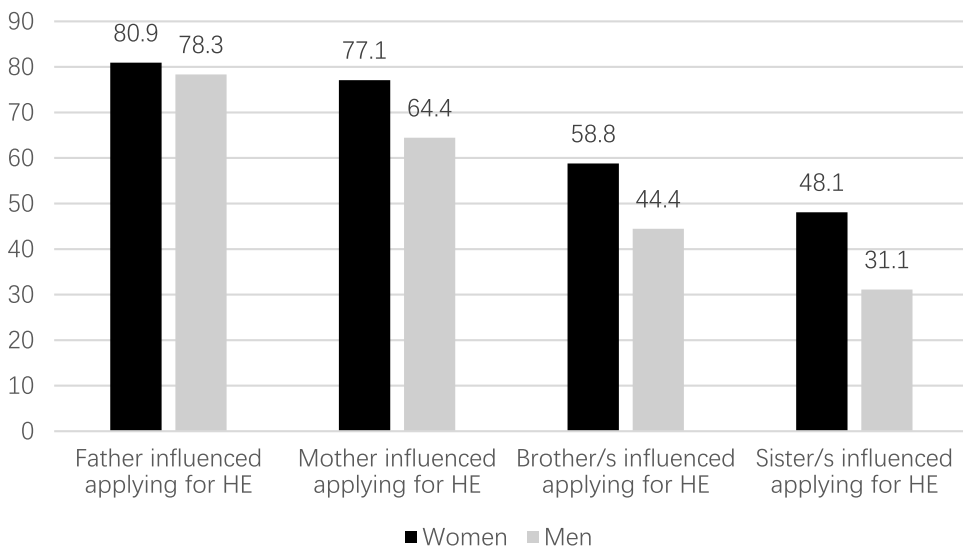


Figure 4. Gendered patterns of parental and sibling influence on respondents' decision to apply for HE (Source: authors).

also Thomas, 2021). Mothers were in some cases pushing for gender transgression for their daughters in the form of new norms of educational attainment for women, but finally this could be overruled by fathers or brothers according to their wish. Gender norms concerning how decisions are made within the family hierarchy are reinforced by the spousal inequalities that were shown in the section on Background, reflecting the wider gender regime.

Rationale

In this section, we draw on the interviews and FGDs with students to illustrate gendered rationales for HE access. The basis upon which decisions about HE access are taken is imbued with expectations for gendered futures, in terms of imagined normative life trajectories. These norms are inscribed with binary gender norms that reflect expectations of femininity and masculinity in gender regimes, which differ according to context. For instance, while in Peru women are expected to remain close to their parents and become caregivers, which impacts upon women's HE access opportunities (Guerrero & Rojas, 2020), in Haryana, especially in rural and semi-urban areas, there is a strong patri-local tradition of young women leaving their birth family after marriage and relocating to join their husband's family (Mukhopadhyay & Seymour, 1994). Once married, women contribute their labour (paid/unpaid) to their in-laws' household ("*susural*") (Chowdhry, 2011). The implications of this are that, when a girl child is born, she represents a financial burden, as the birth family must consider the wedding costs, which therefore may impact upon their willingness to invest in her education. On the other hand, a boy child represents future financial security, so may be considered more worthy of investment. These future-oriented expectations feed into the rationale for HE access, which differ along binary gendered lines, even when all children of a family access HE. Gendered interpretations of young people's futures play out in their opportunities in the present, which in turn feed into decision-making practices. While the case of Haryana may seem to represent an extreme example, we can see traces of the same types of gendered considerations in studies from Western contexts, such as the risk aversion women students demonstrated in studies by Lörz et al. (2011) and Strecker and Feixa (2020) and mothers'/friends' concerns about women's future potential to become mothers in Myklebust's (2019) Norway-based study of women who chose "gender-untypical" subjects of study.

For young women, marriage featured strongly in relation to the rationale for and against HE access and also in relation to choice of institution and course. Generational norms played out here, where in many families accessing HE was a form of gender transgression for women, since it exceeded what were considered to be appropriate levels of education – and spatial mobility – for previous generations. Women students discussed the expectation from older generations that completing high school was considered (more than) enough for young women's education:

My paternal aunt had refused [that I go to college], saying that, "You have completed class 12 [end of high school], stay at home". (SDC.FGD.W.2)

The implication here was that HE access of any kind was seen as a luxury for women within many families, meaning that limited choice could be exercised. A further fear

that was reported upon (particularly emanating from older generations) was reducing a daughter's marriageability if a woman is then considered over-educated. Moreover, delaying marriage meant that young women would require further financial investment from parents and/or brothers for their education and upkeep. Wedding costs weighed heavily on participants' families. One participant (SDC.FGD.W.3) was already married as there had been pressure for multiple siblings to get married at the same time, to save on wedding costs. An alternative rationale for accessing HE in slightly more economically advantaged and/or less traditional families was that HE was considered a way of enhancing marriageability, as having an educated daughter-in-law was a coveted quality. A participant (SDC.FGD.W.1) stated that an undergraduate degree was a minimum requirement, as to a potential groom's family, a degree was more desirable than school completion. This rationale played into HE choice as, where HE was considered a means to a marriage-enhancing certificate and a way of passing time before marriage, the choice of institution and course were expressed as somewhat immaterial. Women's employment prospects were largely absent from families' decision-making processes for their daughters' HE study, though women students themselves discussed ambitions to enter into the workforce at least temporarily after HE study (see Henderson et al., 2024b). Choice of institution for women was often based on decisions pertaining to safety, as families were worried that their daughter's *izzat* or honour would be spoilt before she could be married, so they often selected the nearest college to home or that with the safest commute (see also Borker, 2021). Participants expressed the challenges for women in accessing HE after marriage, citing in-laws' reluctance and the impossibility of managing HE study alongside a daughter-in-law's heavy household burden; it was considered vital to access HE before marriage wherever possible.

The principles underpinning decisions about young men's HE access were related to their future masculinity-ascribed status as breadwinners and financial providers for their parents and indeed siblings (see also Burke, 2011). For example, one participant (MDC.FGD.M.2) stated that he wanted to complete HE in order to "support his parents in their old age". Another participant (MDC.FGD.M.3) aimed to use HE for upward social mobility: "in my family success has been a little low ... I will uplift them in society". In Haryana, the trajectory for a son involves getting married as soon as the young man is settled in an occupation. In more economically disadvantaged families, this responsibility may detract from the potential to access HE; one interview participant (MDC.Int.W.2) mentioned that sons may be obliged to seek employment after class 12 to finance a sister's wedding. In other families, sons were expected to gain as high a qualification as possible, in a suitable domain, to qualify for a secure and lucrative post and/or to continue the family business. Employability was therefore a high priority in terms of the masculinity-inscribed rationale for HE access, with marriageability still playing a role in that more highly educated grooms were considered more appealing. Because of the role of the son in contributing to the family economy, HE represents a source of risk for young men: the risk is that the investment in HE will not pay off, and the young man will be unemployed. A participant explained:

[This factor] is related to boys. They only think, parents think, "[Boys] have done class 12, do some work and earn 8,000–10,000 [INR]". By doing BCom [Commerce degree], here there is not value to graduation. This is the main thing. There is very little value to graduation in India

... And they [family] say that, "You go for government job", after class 12 they ask you to start coaching: "Leave everything with study and do coaching for the government services. Get a government job, [then, just] sit and eat". (SDC.Int.M.2)

Since the rationale for men's HE access was closely tied with future employment, the element of HE choice was fraught with pressure, in terms of selecting a course with high employment potential, choosing the best possible college within the family's means, and often taking coaching classes for civil service examinations alongside HE in order to have multiple options open. Given the prevalent gender regime and the highly prescribed gender roles in traditional Haryana society, all students who entered HE were located in relation to this dual rationale. Even if they were themselves transgressing the expectations of their families or society at large, this transgression was pitched in relation to the strict norms they were transgressing, and after all the decision making almost never lay solely in their own hands, for young people of any gender.

Discussion and conclusion

Working through the analytical framework (Figure 1) for a holistic analysis of the gendered conditions of HE access, we have demonstrated ways in which young people's entry into HE is shaped by gender, even when all young people in a family or community enter HE. By investigating young people's background, gendered conditions emerge that shape the ways in which young people enter HE. For instance, if there is a gender-differentiated history of educational opportunities in previous generations, this potentially sets different expectations of the younger generation along gendered lines, potentially with young women's HE access framed with reluctance versus obligation for young men's HE access. If there has been a history in the family of men working outside of the home and women working in the home (irrespective of educational attainment), this sets different trajectories for the present generation according to masculine and feminine norms of workforce participation. Schooling history is closely connected with the other aspects of students' background, as choices about school are gendered. In a system where private schooling is common, but resources for school fees are limited, sons are more likely to be sent to private school and daughters are more likely to attend government schools, which then creates differentiated conditions of HE preparedness. Decision-making processes about HE are shaped by those who are involved, influence itself also being gendered. For instance, in our study, mothers were generally less influential than fathers; this can in part be attributed to the lower levels of formal education of mothers as compared to fathers, which is entangled with the lower social status of women in the patriarchal gender regime. The rationale for HE access both explains and shapes the decisions taken about HE. Rationale points to gendered expectations of what form the future will take for young people – in terms of their role in the family and their future occupation/employment. These expectations are influenced by the previous generations, for instance in relation to which levels of formal education are considered necessary or appropriate according to norms of femininity and masculinity, and how education is conceived in relation to work. Different gendered ideas about the purpose of HE result in different significations of HE as negative, risky and/or positive. These different significations of HE are wielded by different gendered actors with different gendered levels of influence, leading to different gendered decisions.

By deploying a gender prism analytic, we unpacked the ways in which gender norms of femininity and masculinity enter into the conditions of HE access, revealing disparities even when young people across genders enter into HE. Through a social reading of gender – as opposed to a deterministic or essentialized reading – we can see the ways in which gender norms pertaining to HE access become naturalised as seemingly obvious binary paths for young women and men to follow. Moreover, by exploring the ways in which people’s gender is interpreted and ascribed by others, seeing gender as a social process, it is possible to see HE decision making as a site where families ascribe gender norms to their offspring, potentially resulting in different angles on HE choice. Understanding gendered conditions of HE access as being located within and shaped by the predominant gender regime then contextualises the gendered dynamics, which in the case of our study were heavily shaped by patrilocal traditions. Too often, readings of gender in relation to HE access attribute gendered differences to the gender of the person but do not unpick why or how a person’s gender leads to different life opportunities. In our study, where the students were predominantly first-generation HE entrants, HE represented an inter-generational schism for young men and women alike, but for different reasons based on different anticipated future trajectories. Attending HE was in and of itself something of a gendered transgression, particularly for young women, given the educational histories of women in previous generations of their families.

It may appear easier to apply the analytical framework in societies which are obviously patriarchal, such as Haryana. In societies which make stronger claims for gender equality, the differences may *appear* to be less stark. However, most societies are structured around heterosexual marriage and childbearing, usually taking the form of dyadic partnerships between heterosexual, cis-gendered individuals who are located within family structures. Family structures include legal aspects such as marriage, property and inheritance, as well as more intangible ideals that are shaped within families and imparted to children. Ideas of what is expected or appropriate are constructed within families and communities and these codes are inherently gendered, and this includes the ways in which gender transgression such as queerness, non-binary gender and trans identities are received in families. There is an enduring normative binary division which underpins the social structuring of families and communities and which serves as a backdrop against which transgression and redefinition occur. While this division exists, being born as a daughter or a son in a family has a different meaning. There is more work to do to explore how conditions of HE access are gendered in societies that are considered less overtly patriarchal, building on the important critical work already conducted in this area (e.g. Burke, 2011; Cooper, 2013; Myklebust, 2019).

In asking *how are the conditions of HE access gendered?* as the overarching question for this article, we referred to the investments and attachments that inhere in decision making about HE, and which are inevitably layered with gendered expectations of young people’s future roles and contributions in their families, communities and societies. We argue that, when making claims about gendered access to HE, there is no “natural” gendered association. Rather, HE access is underpinned by the complex social web of gendered relationships and codes and expectations of femininity and masculinity that encircle any person as they contemplate HE. It is hoped that the analytical framework proposed in this article will be deployed in conducting gender analyses of HE access in other contexts, will be tested and challenged, but above all will lead to holistic gender analyses

that do not accept simplistic measures such as GPI as evidence that gendered inequalities of HE access have been solved.

Note

1. It is noteworthy that, in Indian society, cousins and close contacts within the community may be referred to as “brother” (*bhai* in Hindi) and “sister” (*behen*). Data from our study on the influence of brothers and sisters need to be understood as potentially exceeding the nuclear family (Chowdhry, 2011).

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