



Domesticated gender (in) equality: Women's education & gender relations among rural communities in Pakistan



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 February 2015

Received in revised form 27 May 2016

Accepted 3 August 2016

Available online 13 August 2016

Keywords:

International education

Women's education

Gender equality

Domestic gender relations

Culture

Muslim women

ABSTRACT

Grounded in a gender equity perspective, this ethnography of educated women professionals from rural and low-income communities of Pakistan examines the impact of women's education on gender relations in the domestic sphere. The analysis shows how education can produce contested practices of gender equality through providing educated women access to new roles in public spaces while further integrating them in the domestic sphere. It questions the current emphasis on gender parity among international educational policies and projects as the key to empowering women. Instead of approaching gender equality as the ability of educated women to participate in public institutions, this article emphasizes the need to examine how education can reproduce certain gender hierarchies while transforming others in the domestic sphere.

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1. Introduction

Women's education has become a major site for international development interests and projects in developing and Muslim countries (Gee, 2014; Monkman, 2011; Stromquist and Fischman, 2009). International development paradigms present education for women as being central to gender empowerment as well as to economic, social, and political progress for developing countries (Herz and Sperling, 2004; Schultz, 2002; Tembon and Fort, 2008). The paradigm presents gender equality as an issue of access to resources and institutions such as schools and labor markets (Guin'ee, 2014; Jeffrey et al., 2008). This gender *parity* approach presumes that if we educate more women, then this will translate into more women entering the labor market, which in turn will translate into greater gender equality (Gee, 2014; Unterhalter, 2010). However, despite women's improved access to schools and labor markets in many developing countries, we have yet to experience the expected positive outcomes of the gender parity approach, especially in terms of women's improved social and economic status (Chisamya et al., 2012; Unterhalter, 2007; Subrahmanian, 2005).

While recognizing its success in making valuable resources available to women, feminist scholars have also problematized the gender parity approach by showing how women's education is a

multidimensional and highly context-specific process that can be empowering as well as constraining (Chisamya et al., 2012; DeJaeghere et al., 2013; DeJaeghere and Lee, 2011; Stromquist, 2002; Unterhalter et al., 2013). These scholars argue that the gender parity approach is limited because of its conceptualization of gender equality as merely a question of access (Aikman and Unterhalter, 2005; Maslak, 2008; Fennell and Arnot, 2008; Unterhalter, 2007; Subrahmanian, 2005). Rather than assuming that gender parity will lead to greater gender equality, this scholarship has argued that gender *equity* should be the focus. A gender equity approach examines how context-specific structural inequalities govern gendered social relations as well as the impact of access to education and labor markets on gender equality (Unterhalter et al., 2013). For example, women's access to important resources and institutions can address some aspects of gender inequality while reproducing other forms of gendered hierarchies. In some contexts, women's entry into male-dominated public spaces and institutions has subjected these women to a stricter regulation of sexuality (Author 2016). Thus, gender *equity* approach presents gender equality as a multidimensional process that cannot be achieved only through providing women access to education, labor market, and other resources. It emphasizes the need for educational researchers and policymakers to critically engage with the structural shifts that are produced as a result of women taking on new roles and responsibilities in different contexts.

Grounded in a gender equity perspective, this ethnography of educated women professionals from rural and low-income

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communities of Pakistan examines the impact of women's access to education and labor market on gender relations within the domestic sphere. This focus on the domestic sphere is particularly productive as evidence shows that the gender relations within the domestic domain have not significantly changed even when women's roles in public spheres have been transformed in many national and cultural contexts (Hochschild, 1997; Sullivan, 2004). Feminist scholars also argue that the impact of education and labor market participation on gendered roles in the domestic sphere can be uneven as well as difficult to observe. As a result, the attention to study such changes, or lack of them, in the domestic sphere has not been as extensive as the focus on women's role in public spaces (Murphy-Graham, 2012; Sullivan, 2004).

This ethnographic study focuses on day-to-day experiences of the educated women professionals to reveal a complex and yet profound impact of education and labor market participation on gender relations in the domestic sphere. The *parhi likhi*¹ or educated women who participated in this ethnographic study were among the first of a small group of women in their communities to have received higher education; they subsequently entered the labor market as teachers in girls' schools serving their communities. This article shows and articulates three interrelated shifts in the domestic lives and relations of these women that simultaneously contradicted and reinforced each other. First, it shows how women's education was implicated in reshaping some traditional gendered norms through providing *parhi likhi* women access not only to male-dominated spheres of jobs and public mobility but also to increased status in family decision-making among other things. Second, this paper examines how women's education was also mobilized to reinforce the traditional gendered division of domestic labor between men and women. The educated women were expected to become "perfect domestic subjects" through excelling in their traditional roles as homemakers and childcare providers. Finally, it reveals how education produced a new gendered hierarchy between *parhi likhi* and *unparhi*² women within the same families as it provided exclusive privileges and opportunities to the *parhi likhi* women. These three processes provide insights into how access to education and labor market produced new gendered relations not only between men and women but also between differentially positioned in the domestic sphere. This interplay between the traditional and new roles for educated women in the domestic sphere complicates the linear narrative of women's education that uses gender parity in public spheres as a proxy for gender equality. Instead, this ethnographic analysis reveals how gender equality is a complex process shaped by structural inequalities and cultural norms that determine the meaning and purpose of education in a specific context.

The following sections discuss the significance of approaching women's education and gender equality as more than an issue of access to schools and employment. It provides the conceptual lens to examine the impact of education on the lives of women as well as on the shifting gendered norms around women's roles inside and outside of home.

2. What does women's education do?

International development agencies and nation states focus on increasing the enrollment, retention, and graduation rates of female students in order to provide women with improved access

¹ Urdu term for educated women. The term used by the participants to discuss educated women

² Urdu term for uneducated. This gender neutral term used by the participants to discuss uneducated people

to educational and economic resources in "developing" countries (Chisamya et al., 2012). Despite narrow conceptualizations of gender equality as gender parity, global and local actors have been successful in making schools accessible to girls from marginalized contexts in a number of developing countries (Gee, 2014; Unterhalter, 2010). However, in most cases this success has not translated into gender quality (Unterhalter, 2007; Subrahmanian, 2005). Ironically, the gender parity approach is being implemented by the international development agencies for the developing countries, even though we know from existing research that parity has not resulted in equality among countries where women's education has long been established. For example, Hochschild and Machung (2003) showed in their pioneering work that the middle and upper-class women in the US remained primarily responsible for household work and child care despite their paid jobs in the formal public sector. The gendered social, political, and economic relations continue to present home as a feminized domestic space even in contexts that offer women relatively better access to educational institutions and labor markets.

In order to understand why gender inequality in these contexts could not be realized simply by enrolling equal numbers of girls and boys in schools, critical feminist scholars focusing on developing countries have offered the gender equity approach as an alternative model. The gender equity perspective argues to conceptualize gender inequalities as an issue of attitudes, structures, and sociocultural processes, and not merely of access (Aikman and Unterhalter, 2005; Maslak, 2008; Fennell and Arnot, 2008; Stromquist, 2002; Unterhalter, 2003; Monkman, 2011; Ross et al., 2011). The impact of women's access to education and labor market on gender equality, thus, is to be contextualized in the stability and/or shifts in the gender norms that both constrain and support opportunity and agency for different members of the society.

The gender equity perspective challenges the international development paradigm that presents a linear process of gender empowerment through providing women access to schools and labor markets. This perspective argues that the impact of women's participation in the labor market, presented by the international development agencies as one of the most important goals of girls' schooling (Abu-Lughod, 2009), is to be contextualized in the social, cultural, and economic relations that men and women are part of (Unterhalter et al., 2013). For example, Chisamya et al. (2012) show how the "success" stories of filling the gender gap in Bangladesh and Malawi have not resulted in expected gender equity and empowerment outcomes that international discourse had predicted. In this case, girls' access to education did not improve women's secondary status as well as their experiences of gender discrimination and violence inside and outside of schools. Similarly, Abu-Rabia-Queder (2014) discusses how the Bedouin Muslim women receiving higher education in Israeli universities experienced "othering" in the university as well as in their own communities. At the Israeli universities, their identities became marked as members of a racialized minority group and impacted their learning experiences. On the other hand, they had to strictly follow gendered norms of their communities to demonstrate that being educated had not impacted their ethnic and religious identity.

Thus feminist scholarship also challenges the prediction that women's access to education and labor market would transform their traditional roles in the domestic sphere. For example, the phenomenon of educated women having access to economic resources while also being responsible for feminized domestic labor highlights how education may provide new avenues to women while also making them subject to additional responsibilities. Greany (2008) discusses how the household responsibilities remained a female domain even if women had paid employment

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