

# Gendering Cultural Capital: Education and the Reproduction of Social Inequality in India

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## Abstract

Gender inequality in education is still relevant in regards to opportunities and social mobility pattern in Indian society. Even though education is generally seen to be a medium that facilitates upward mobility, the availability of the cultural resources that facilitate the utilization of education establishments is not evenly distributed between the genders. Based on the idea of cultural capital formulated by Pierre Bourdieu, the paper attempts to provide a sociological discussion on gendered socialization and patriarchal modes of action which influence the construction of cultural capital among women. Cultural capital which is manifested in linguistic proficiency, educational orientation, cultural knowledge and institutional acknowledgement is central in helping people to negotiate the educational system and acquire social mobility. However, the lack of access to such types of capital is often hindered by capitalistic family set-ups and gendered expectations of women. Women, therefore, may face the challenge of translating their education success into social mobility that is significant. Through these relationships, the paper highlights how access to the cultural capital inequalities perpetuates gender inequalities in the modern Indian society.

**Keywords** Cultural Capital, Educational stratification, Gender Inequality, Patriarchal Socialization, Symbolic Inequality

## Introduction

In modern India, gender inequality is one of the acute aspects of social stratification, particularly in relation to education and the relevant trends in social mobility. Education has been generally considered as the powerful tool of social transformation, which can allow people to overcome structural barriers and improve their socio-economic status. However, it has been a longstanding sociological tradition to warn that the issue of education does not necessarily lead to equal chances of progress; access to and success in schooling is deeply determined by the access to cultural resources, socialization processes, and the system of inequality in general (Bourdieu, 1986; Sen, 1999). Such dynamics have an added importance within a gendered perspective in that women are often faced with structural and cultural restriction that limits their ability to benefit maximally in educational opportunities. The principle that stands out as one of the most important theoretical frameworks used to

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understand these processes is the notion of cultural capital that was presented by Pierre Bourdieu. Cultural capital refers to a collection of symbolic resources linguistic competence, educational orientation, cultural knowledge, and behavioural dispositions, which, as Bourdieu points out, are largely acquired at the family level and shaped in the process of socialization (Bourdieu, 1986). Such resources are critical in determining how people relate to institutional outfits like schools and universities. There are three forms of cultural capital that include embodied, objectified and institutionalized, which all serve in the process of navigating the educational systems and transforming academic qualification into social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Swartz, 1997).

Patriarchal social structures and gendered socialization patterns are two fundamental factors that determine how cultural capital is accumulated and passed on in the framework of gender relations. Feminist Sociologists argue that the institutions of patriarchy have continued to control access to resources, opportunities and public spaces by women affecting their life opportunities and socio-economic mobility (Walby, 1990; Acker, 1990). In most households and societies, gender is used to dictate expectations as far as education, career choices, and mobility are concerned. Such expectations are often based on the education of males and at the same time lock the ability of girls to interact with learning institutions (Kabeer, 2005).

As a result, girls can face implicit yet effective disadvantages in their attainment of essential kinds of cultural capital, such as intellectual confidence, the ability to express themselves in large groups, and being exposed to cultural and academic instigators that facilitate educational success. These gendered processes of socialization do not only have an influence on the participation in education but also constitute dispositions and aspirations that are fundamental to the accumulation of cultural capital. In this regard, the idea of habitus by Pierre Bourdieu can be considered an important form of analysis. According to Bourdieu, people internalize the social structures by involving themselves in quotidian practices and experiences that eventually define their perception, desires and behaviors in social institutions (Bourdieu, 1977). A gendered habitus can also reinforce girls in patriarchal societies to take on an attitude and behaviour that fits traditional norms of femininity, which include modesty, domestic inclination and restricted involvement in the larger community. These attitudes affect the way women deal with institutions of learning and can limit their chances of transforming education qualifications into meaningful social mobility.

In the last couple of decades educational opportunities have grown significantly, and the policy has been used to support gender equality in education and women empowerment. The growing number of girls joining schools and universities is an indication that the plight of curbing the gender differences has not been in vain (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). However, the enhanced access to education is not sufficient to eliminate the structural inequalities; the disparity in the access to cultural resources, differences in familial support, and adherence to gender expectations remain influential factors in creating educational experiences and their outcomes, therefore, perpetuating broader patterns of social stratification (Bourdieu, 1986; Kabeer, 2005).

With this backdrop the current paper explores the connection between gender, cultural capital, and education in the modern India in a sociological context. Through the theoretical

framework by Pierre Bourdieu, the paper examines the effects of gendered patterns of socialization in accumulating cultural capital and its transmission and how this has an impact on the social mobility of women. By placing gender in the context of a larger cultural reproduction process, the paper will be able to add to sociological discussions concerning education, inequality and gender in modern Indian society.

### **Theoretical Framework: Cultural Capital and Gender**

In an attempt to understand the argument between gender, education and social mobility, there is need to develop a solid theoretical approach that explains the occurrence of inequalities in social institutions. The theory of cultural capital developed by Pierre Bourdieu provides a valuable analytical tool to analyze the role of cultural resources in educational experiences and chances of upward mobility. Bourdieu (1986) argued that it is not only economic capital that reinforces social inequality but also cultural and symbolic resources that the individuals receive through the process of socialization in their families and through their social surrounding in general. The dispositions, talents, and relationships of individuals within the institutions like schools and universities are influenced by these cultural resources hence affect their academic success and social mobility in the future. According to Bourdieu, three key types of cultural capital were singled out: embodied, objectified and institutionalized (Bourdieu, 1986). Embodied cultural capital refers to dispositions that are long and include linguistic competence, habits, attitudes, and cultural knowledge that human beings learn as they grow and socialize into a family and in the community. These internalized dispositions determine how people communicate, express and interact with learning environments. Objectified cultural capital involves material cultural capital like books, learning materials, artistic objects and other intellectual resources that aid in the process of learning and cultural exposure.

Institutionalized cultural capital is the institutionalized educational degrees and qualifications that are recognized and appreciated by the institutions and society. Even though the educational systems are often brought out as being meritocratic, i.e. the success is determined by individual ability and effort, this supposition burdens the unequal allocation of cultural resources amongst the social groups.

When cultural capital is similar to the cultural expectation in the institutions, students are likely to attain academic success whereas those with low cultural capital are likely to face indirectly disadvantaged situations. This way, education may serve as a means of cultural reproduction, which serves to maintain social inequalities in addition to not eradicating them (Swartz, 1997). The framework of cultural capital can be used to understand that the allocation of cultural resources is not gender neutral when applied to the gender relations. Feminist sociologists have emphasized that the access to resources, opportunities and knowledge is often influenced by the patriarchal social structures (Walby, 1990). Gendered processes of socialization in families also determine the kind of cultural experiences and expectations that boys and girls are subjected to at a tender age. As an example, boys are in most cases pushed to grow up on their own, assertive, and intellectually confident, unlike girls who are mostly pushed into feminine roles of being modest, taking care of the home, and living within the conventional gender norms (Kabeer, 2005). These socialization

processes of gendering influence the concentration of embodied cultural capital. Girls might not be allowed to practice speaking to a crowd, leading and participating in activities that involve intellectual and cultural development that would make them have confidence in school.

Although women may possibly attain greater education, the structure of social relations that bind women into traditional gender roles, family obligations and limited mobility may make it hard to translate education success into economic and social success. The other important element of Bourdieu framework is the habitus concept which is the internalized dispositions and perceptions that people acquire as they are socialized in specific social contexts (Bourdieu, 1977). Habitus influences the perceived opportunities, development of aspirations and the engagement of institutional environments by the individuals. Gendered habitus can also affect the educational and career aspirations of women in patriarchal societies by promoting adherence to traditional gender roles. These internalized norms may inhibit the involvement of women in larger social and professional realms hence inhibiting their ability to fully take advantage of the cultural capital acquired through education. The cultural capital framework thus presents a strong sociological approach of the analysis of gender inequalities in education and social mobility.

### **Gendered Socialization and the Formation of Cultural Capital**

Socialization, a process that takes place within households and other social institutions, is directly associated with the creation and transfer of cultural resources that determine the educational attainment and social mobility (Kabeer, 2005; Nussbaum, 2000). Socialization makes people absorb social norms, values and expectations of behaviour that define their abilities to interact with institutions like schools and higher institutions of learning. When gender norms are firmly embedded within a given society, these socialization processes often tend to become gendered and hence lead to differences in how cultural competencies are developed by boys and girls. In the Indian society, gendered process of socialization remains influential in the allocation of cultural capital hence impacting education achievement and chances of social mobility (Kabeer, 2005; Nussbaum, 2000).

Families are the main site through which cultural orientations and behavioural dispositions are passed down the generation. Children learn communication patterns, education attitudes, and social roles expectations through interactions in the everyday life. Nevertheless, cultural resources investment by parents is frequently predetermined by gendered expectations of future duties and life paths. Boys are often encouraged to acquire qualities like independence, leadership, intellectual confident and girls are often socialized to practice domestic duties, modest demeanor, and commit to their family duties (Chodorow, 1978; Sen, 1999). These socialized gendered practices shape what kind of cultural competences children develop and the way they think and relate to their educational institutions. These processes are critical in determining embodied cultural capital which includes dispositions that are inclusive of confidence in communication, intellectual curiosity, and familiarity with academic practices.

On the other hand, girls who are not encouraged to voice their views publicly or even be assertive may lack the chance to develop such skills and this may hinder their classroom

interaction and success in school (Kabeer, 2005). Such minor differences could cause differences in educational participation and educational ambitions and academic paths over time. The socialization of gender can also be strengthened at the school level through institutional culture and in the day-to-day interrelations. Learning classrooms, the attitudes of teachers, and peer relationships are often portrayals of certain social norms that influence the way students perceive their role in learning environments. It has been suggested by feminist sociological research that gender hierarchies can be reproduced through the institutional cultures whereby behaviours that are traditionally linked with masculinity including competitiveness, authority, and assertiveness are valued (Acker, 1990). The other students whose cultural dispositions fit in these expectations might adjust more easily to the institutional settings, and the others might struggle to deal with them.

Prospects of education and views of opportunities in future are also formed in gendered socialization processes. Femininity expectations in culture tend to shape the perception of girls about the importance of education in their lives. The education of girls remains, in most senses, evaluated with reference to family roles or matrimonial options rather than as an avenue to professional personalities (Nussbaum, 2000; Kabeer, 2005). These expectations may also influence the educational ambitions of girls to higher education and even employment hence influencing the conversion of educational attainments into social mobility opportunities. Other than the family institution and school, other cultural institutions such as media representations, community networks and social traditions are also involved in the creation of gendered sense of knowledge and success. Gender stereotypes about women as mothers or as passive characters could have an insidious impact on the girlish ambitions and self-image, and gender stereotypes of men as leaders and decision-makers contribute to the establishment of the power of masculinity in society and in the workplace. These cultural stories constitute a larger social space within which the cultural resources are appreciated, passed, and understood, thus defining how the individuals acquire cultural competencies and navigate the institutional situations (Sen, 1999). At the same time, however, the modern social changes have started questioning the traditional gender socialization trends in India. The availability of education, urbanization, and heightened exposure to other cultures across the world has all been a contributory factor to a changing aspiration amongst young women and their families. Such developments have been in a position to help numerous women to get access to educational space and cultural resources that were once closed.

However, the patriarchal norms and the structural inequalities have still been in effect in distributing and using cultural resources and in many cases hindering the ability of women to access their full educational potential (Kabeer, 2005; Nussbaum, 2000). The connection between gendered socialization and cultural capital is thus important in the analysis of the more broad dynamism of education and social mobility. The unequal access to the cultural resources is not only a result of individual difference, but also integrated into the social processes, which define the opportunity, expectation and institutional interactions.

### **Education and Social Mobility: Gendered Pathways**

Education is an important tool that enables one to acquire upward social mobility. In the present societies, schools are the places where people learn, develop skills and even acquire

formal degrees that can help them secure better jobs and even better socio-economic status. However, the nexus in education and social mobility has always been revealed by sociological scholarship to be unequal across the social groupings. Class, caste and gender based structural inequalities determine how individuals experience the educational institutions and how much educational achievement can be converted into larger social progress (Goldthorpe, 2000; Breen and Jonsson, 2005).

Gender still remains a central factor in the Indian context which dictates the courses of education that induce social mobility. In spite of the fact that in recent decades the proliferation of educational opportunities has significantly increased the enrolment of women into the primary and tertiary institutions, the fruits of their involvement are mediated by the larger social and cultural milieus.

Education qualifications and their own are not necessarily the basis of mobility but the ability to translate education into social advantage is dependent on the social and cultural resources of individuals. A topical explanation of these dynamics is the concept of cultural capital, which was given by Pierre Bourdieu. Cultural capital involves types of knowledge, linguistic competence, values and dispositions which are recognized and rewarded in institutional settings. Even in educational institutions, cultural competencies typical of dominant social groups are often favored over others and, in this way, people who possess such resources are able to perform better in school and have a better prospect of a good professional future (Lamont and Lareau, 1988).

The cultural norms and expectations within the family also play an important role in influencing women mobility patterns. There are societal expectations, which concern marriage and care giving routinely when making decisions in career progression, geographic mobility and future career ambitions. Women do have the risk of being pressured to work on family issues rather than career improvement, thus limiting the legal career advancement and future opportunities of the upward mobility.

Despite these limitations, education has remained a powerful tool towards women empowerment and social change. Higher education can also increase awareness of rights, expand social connections, and increase the role of women in both social and professional spheres. Further, the changes in gender norms can be brought about by education as it provides women with the means to question the traditional norms and to follow their own ways of life. However, the pedagogic power of education depends on the institutional and social environment to a great extent. The returns to education are still skewed as long as structural barriers persist in labour markets and social institutions. In line with this, a conceptualization of gendered modes of social movements would require an analysis of not just education access, but also the social organization that surrounds the worth and use of education qualification in the present-day Indian society.

### **Structural and Cultural Barriers to Women's Cultural Capital**

In spite of the increased accessibility to education and increased policy attention on gender equality, in India women continue to face structural and cultural barriers to gaining access to cultural resources and even social mobility. These barriers are represented via the social

norms, institutional practices and historically deeply rooted unequal systems according to which cultural capital is distributed and recognized. According to sociological scholarship, the inequality in cultural resources is often reproduced through the everyday social processes and institutional arrangements, which benefit a particular group of individuals and alienate others (Reay, 2004; Lareau, 2011). One structural barrier that stands out as a significant obstacle to women having cultural capital is the gendered division of resources within the family structure. Family is the main stage where the desire to learn, culture and intellectual practices are cultivated. However, gender roles as perceived by the parents are often a determinant of the promotion and nurturing that is provided to the daughters as compared to the sons. Research into the socialization of families has shown that gendered expectations guide the choice that is made in relation to investment in education, interest in extracurricular activities, and experience with cultural interactions that lead to academic confidence and competence (Lareau, 2011).

Such differences in the initial exposure to culture can affect the learning of the competencies that are valued in educational institutions. The cultural and traditional ideas of femininity also limit access of women to cultural resources. In many settings, women are expected to focus on home chores and child-rearing and, therefore, the opportunities to engage in intellectual activities as well in professional settings are limited. Sociological studies indicate that gender norms do not only influence the accessibility of education by women, but also their undertakings and views of possible career opportunities (Ridgeway, 2011). When these expectations get internalized by girls, they can put family responsibilities ahead of career decisions, thus, affecting their choices of education and future career patterns.

The educational and professional opportunities of women are also limited due to movement limitations and the security aspect. In many social situations, a woman is limited to her movements in social places, particularly when the woman wants to access higher education and even get employment opportunities outside the house. Such restrictions could reduce access to institutions that provide high-level training, professional networks and cultural exposure that is necessary in career progression (Jeffrey *et al.*, 2008). Therefore limited mobility curtails the social experience avenues where cultural capital is accumulated and employed. Gender inequalities are also reinforced in the institutional levels like education and employment. Frequently, words of power and governance that are in line with the masculine norms are promoted by corporate cultures and unspoken prejudices.

Women can also receive challenges in their journey to leadership positions, professional acknowledgment, and promotion even when their educational backgrounds are equally equivalent. In sociological studies of the working environment, it is stressed that these types of institutional practices perpetuate long-lasting gendered occupational inequalities and thus limited the extent of women to convert educational achievement into social mobility (Acker, 2006; England, 2010). The other important dimension of inequity is the corroboration of gender with other layers of social groupings such as the class, caste and location. Marginalized women usually face various challenges that hinder their education and cultural accessibility. Their ability to acquire skills that the mainstream institutions value can be

limited by structural injustices that concern the quality of schooling, language barriers, and limited access to social networks (Desai and Kulkarni, 2008).

These types of overlapping inequalities bolster existing social stratification patterns. Despite these constraints, the social changes during the last few decades have already begun to reorganize the nexus between gender and education in India. The growth of higher education, the increase in the rate of women involvement in professional life, and the introduction of female role models have played their roles in gradual change of gender norms. These changes have created new possibilities of women in order to accumulate cultural assets and challenge traditional limits.

Understanding these obstacles is essential to an analysis of the reproduction and challenge of gender inequality in educational institutions simultaneously. To correct them, it is imperative to not only increase the availability of education, but also to change the social and institutional milieu according to which cultural resources are distributed and recognized to impact the connection between gender, cultural capital, and social mobility.

### **Discussion**

The connection between gender, education, as well as the social mobility cannot be understood through the mere expansion of education opportunity. Even though education has often been seen as a path towards equality, sociological views reveal that the benefits that come with education levels are mediated by broader cultural and institutional backgrounds. The skewed nature of cultural capital plays a central role within the Indian context in defining the nature of women in relation to their experiences in institutions of learning and in the ability to transfer the academic success into social mobility. Educational systems are usually assumed to be meritocratic institutions and they reward talent, hard work and academic achievements. However, according to the sociological studies, these institutions often reproduce and reflect the values of dominant culture by prioritizing specific knowledge, language and behaviour. This means that people with cultural dispositions which are consistent with these institutional requirements are therefore, more likely to become successful in their academic studies and also receive benefits in their careers (Dumais, 2002).

Education, in a way, may be both empowering and at the same time a means by which already existing disparities are conceitedly replicated. These processes are closely interconnected in terms of gender in the relations to the allocation and acquiring of cultural resources during socialization. Gender practices shape anticipations with regard to conduct, goals and involvement in societal life. These expectations, in their turn, determine the cultural competencies that people acquire, and the confidence through which they work in the institutional settings. Empirical studies have suggested that gendered socialization tends to foster assertiveness and competitiveness in boys-qualities that are aligned to the ideals of dominant institutions-and more commonly, girls tend to be socialized to appreciate modesty and conformity (Charles and Bradley, 2009).

These differences in cultural dispositions may influence academic interests, career and career paths. The argument also highlights that educational qualifications alone do not guarantee the same chances of social mobility. It is possible that even through the high education that

women have got, structural and cultural forces can hinder their ability to realize the full benefits of their acquired education. Occupational segregation, labour-market inequalities, and opinions regarding family roles often shape the career opportunities of women (Blau, Brinton, and Grusky, 2006). These aspects depict that educational attainments are refracted by broad social arrangements that influence transformation of educational success to economic and social progress. Institutional cultures also play a strong role in supporting the gender inequalities. Schools, universities, and workplaces are often reproductions of the historically established relations of power that are based on the privilege of masculine forms of power and leadership. This means women can be hindered in getting a decision making role, a professional status and leadership roles despite having the qualifications and abilities to serve in such positions as compared to men. Such organizational processes reproduce gender inequalities in the social mobility and support more general trends of social inequality. At the same time, education is one of the key resources to defy the classical gender standards. Schools can open the minds of a person to new concepts, critical thinking and broad networks in a society that widens their dreams and prospects. To most women, higher education provides an environment where traditional demands can be challenged and renegotiated. It has the potential to bring to light the awareness of rights, strengthening agency within individuals, and making them take part in broader social and professional life.

Nonetheless, transformational power of education depends on the supportive social and institutional environments. As long as the mechanisms of education systems and labour market are perpetuating gender inequalities, the ability of women to translate educational achievement into social mobility will be limited. Therefore, gender inequality cannot be chased by simply increasing access to education, but these social norms and institutional practices that determine cultural resources allocation and appreciation are to be changed.

### **Conclusion and Way Forward**

The current research shows that gender has a significant difference in accruing and implementing cultural capital, thus impacting the educational paths and social mobility of women in modern Indian society. Despite the good prospects that education presents in terms of growth, patriarchal culture, family values and institutional aspects often limit women to exploit the opportunities to the full extent. Socialization processes based on gender, uneven resources distribution, and firmly rooted cultural limits still place minor but significant obstacles. Education is therefore a tool of empowerment and a process that perpetuates any existing inequalities. These difficulties need concerted efforts to be resolved. Communities and families ought to promote equal investment in the education of girls and avail more cultural and intellectual experience. Learning institutions should be able to incorporate inclusive measures that would promote confidence, leadership and critical thinking among the girl children. At the same time, workplaces and professional domains should combat institutional barriers that obstruct women in transforming educational performance into a significant socioeconomic development.

Further, cultural change should be broader to confronting constricting gender norms which determine women opportunity and aspiration. The education can only fulfill its potential as a

transformative force towards women empowerment and social mobility in India when structural, cultural and institutional boundaries are addressed together.

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