



CPRHE/NIEPA and The University of Warwick Webinar on A Fair Chance for Education: Gendered Pathways to Higher Education Access and Choice

April 5, 2022 11:00 hrs to 13:00 hrs (UK time): Online

Workshop Report

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Introduction to the Report

This University of Warwick and CPRHE/NIEPA Webinar on 'A Fair Chance for Education: Gendered Pathways to Higher Education Access and Choice' was the Third Impact Event organised by the *Fair Chance for Education: Gendered Pathways to Educational Success in Haryana* (FCF) Project, University of Warwick. The event was hosted by the Centre for Policy Research in Higher Education (CPRHE) at the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA). This collaborative event was organised and coordinated by Ann Stewart, FCF Project Principal Investigator, University of Warwick and project partner, Dr Nidhi S. Sabharwal at CPRHE/NIEPA, and funded by a United Kingdom Economic and Social Research Council's Impact Acceleration Account Grant and the Fair Chance Foundation.

The objectives of the webinar were

- to discuss the ways in which educational pathways to HE are gendered in terms of HE access and choice; that is, the ways in which educational pathways to access HE vary between young women and young men;
- to discuss factors which affect access to HE opportunities and informed choice, and which therefore contribute to gender inequalities;
- to discuss institutional strategies to promote gender equality relating to access to HE opportunities and informed choice, with a focus on sharing experiences of government colleges organising outreach activities on HE opportunities with high schools and families about HE opportunities and choices.

The webinar brought together over 100 participants who included policy makers, institutional leaders and administrators and academics from across India and beyond. The webinar enabled these key educational stakeholders to learn how the FCF project's collaborative research contributed through its findings to these objectives and to reflect upon the suggestions for policy development within the National Education Policy 2020 framework that emerged from the research in particular the contribution that "taster days" (piloted in government colleges in Haryana using the Outreach Activity Resource see Workshop 2 report) could make to the further development of outreach activities focusing on fairer access to HE.

The research findings with policy suggestions, and the use of the taster days (an outreach programme, in the form of a college visit day, to provide information about HE) were welcomed by key discussants, Dr Archana Thakur, Joint Secretary, UGC, New Delhi; Shri Harshit Mishra, Deputy Adviser (Education), NITI Aayog; Dr Rajinder Singh, Principal, SD College, Ambala, Haryana who considered that the organisation of college taster days contributed valuable insights which could be used by local, regional and national policy makers.

This report provides an overview of the webinar and the various discussion points which were raised. The webinar can be viewed in full [here](#).

Concept of the Webinar

Prepared by Dr Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Associate Professor CPRHE/NIEPA and FCF project partner and Prof Ann Stewart, FCF Project Principal Investigator, School of Law, University of Warwick, UK.

Background

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set new global values centred around inclusion—leaving no one behind. The SDGs recognise access to quality education as essential for upward socio-economic mobility. The SDG 4 seeks equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university, and to eliminate gender disparities and ensure equal access to all levels of education for vulnerable groups. Access to quality educational pathways to higher education (HE) is crucial in influencing informed decision-making pertaining to choice of HE studies and shaping career paths.

Globally, there has been progress in achieving gender parity (in favour of women) in access to HE. In India too, the Gender Parity Index (GPI) reached 1.01 in 2019-20, indicating a new disparity in access to HE in favour of women at the national level. However, there exists wide variations among states across India. The GPI varies from 0.83 in Bihar to 1.36 in Kerala. Even though gender parity of enrolment is being achieved, social and gender barriers remain for women and also for young men from disadvantaged groups, in relation to accessing quality educational pathways to HE and making informed decisions about post schooling choices.

Empirical Evidence from India

The empirical evidence generated by the 'A Fair Chance for Education: Gendered Pathways to Educational Success in Haryana' study (a five-year collaborative research project of University of Warwick and research partners in India, 2017-2021), together with other related studies, show that many young people entering HE in India come from families and communities where there is little or no prior experience of HE, or of higher levels of secondary schooling. Students from socially and economically disadvantaged groups are often the first in their families and communities to access HE, so they lack adequate information regarding HE options and the admission process. As such, choices are being made without access to sufficient or accurate information. Informed choices about HE are thus limited. Please find the link to the research briefs here:

<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/law/research/projects/rlaaa3083/output/>

Furthermore, young people are arriving at HE with different levels of gendered dis/advantage. Families play a key role in educational decision making about HE futures of young people, and gender mediates many aspects of family decision making about HE. These gender influences include: whether and how a young person is able to go on to study; who is listened to and relied upon for information; choice of institution, particularly their location; how family resources are assessed to support young people's study; what the

desired outcome of a HE degree may be. For women, college and subject choice are more likely to be based on the college being close to home and/or with a safe reputation, as opposed to availability of subjects or academic reputation. Thus, while there may be gender parity, there are still many gender-based assumptions which affect the HE choices which are available to both young women and young men. They lack access to informed, gender-sensitive information and support.

Government colleges¹ are key institutions providing HE to young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and/or rural or semi-urban areas. They have lower fees than other institutions (such as private colleges) and thus are more affordable. Due to their distribution across rural and semi-urban locations, local colleges, where provided, enable students to study nearer home, thereby avoiding hostel fees. Thus, government colleges are facilitating educational choices and access for first generation learners. However, government colleges have the potential to play a greater role in the communities where they are located, to provide greater information and promote gender-sensitive decision-making in families. Government colleges can serve as college knowledge hubs within local areas, to provide knowledge on choice of college, course of study and career prospects. With appropriate support, colleges can become important agents of change in improving HE informed choice.

These research findings, supported by wider research on ways of facilitating access to HE based upon informed decision making, have resulted in the development of a resource pack– an ‘Outreach Activity Resource’ (OAR) to support colleges in organising a ‘taster’ day (an outreach programme, in the form of a college visit day, to provide information about HE) for school students, and their families where possible, to visit the campus, meet staff, learn more about the range of courses and the admissions process. (Please find the link of the same here: <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/law/research/projects/rlaaa3083/output/>). This latter phase of the project involved working closely with college principals and academic partners in Haryana. The colleges used the OAR to organise taster days, which proved hugely successful in both urban and rural colleges, in spite of ongoing pandemic restrictions. The overwhelming success and desire to repeat the activities recorded by those participating: college principals, college staff, students and their parents, indicate the contribution that such a resource can make to developing an outreach culture in relation to accessing HE.

Promoting a culture of widening participation and informed HE choice is a priority which is shared by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. NEP 2020 recognises the need for increased access, equity, and inclusion through a range of measures, including conducting outreach programmes on HE opportunities among the socially and economically disadvantaged groups to support their successful transition to higher education.

The Webinar

Keeping this context in mind, the webinar aimed to initiate a dialogue on the role of HE access outreach efforts by government colleges to promote gender equality in terms of HE access and informed choice.

¹ Types of Colleges in India: (i) Government Colleges: Colleges that are financially maintained and managed by the Central/State Governments; (ii) Private-Aided Colleges: Colleges that are managed by Trusts, Societies and funded by Central/State Governments; (iii) Private-Unaided Colleges: Colleges that are funded and managed by private individuals/agencies

Objectives

- to discuss the ways in which educational pathways to HE are gendered in terms of HE access and choice; that is, the ways in which educational pathways to access HE vary between young women and young men;
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The webinar brought together policy makers, institutional leaders and administrators and academics.



Welcome Address

Prof. Mishra, director of the Centre for Research in Higher Education (CPRHE)

Prof Mishra shared the welcome address. He welcomed the FCF team, the guest speakers, the staff of CPRHE/NIEPA and the audience to the webinar. Prof. Mishra then shared some thoughts about the massification of HE in India.

Prof. Varghese, Vice-Chancellor of National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA)

Prof. Varghese also shared a brief welcome address and shared his delight at chairing this webinar. He congratulated the FCF team for their research which, he said, has contributed to a more in-depth understanding of the gendered HE landscape of Haryana.

Presentation of FCF research findings

Dr Emily Henderson, Associate Professor and Co-investigator for the FCF project, Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick

Dr Henderson presented the design and findings from the project. She shared key findings around limited choices available to the massification generation and how these choices are gendered. The findings also bring to question the idea that gender parity is equivalent to numerical parity in access, which ignores other factors that make access gendered. The role of parents in making HE choices was also highlighted as a key finding from the study. Lack of access to reliable information was found to be a key challenge students and families face when trying to access HE.

Further, due to birth order (with more older sisters followed by younger brothers) and gendered educational trajectories within the earlier generations (fathers generally having attained higher educational levels than mothers), it was found that women are making more substantial leaps in accessing HE and therefore face more substantial obstacles. First generation learners are 'trailblazers' who facilitate HE choices for others around them, and often these are women. The study also highlighted that young people do have agency and act strategically to facilitate their access to HE with their families and social circles.

Government colleges were found to be key for improving informed choice as they are at the 'frontiers of access'; i.e. they serve as important sources of reliable information and support for HE in their communities. The study calls for gender to be retained as an area of focus for 'gender equitable informed choice' in accessing HE. It further calls for an outreach mechanism to be implemented to improve the choice making process. Dr Henderson shared about the impact stage of the project which piloted the outreach toolkit successfully with three colleges in Haryana which were attended by over 1000 students across the colleges.

Responses from Discussants

Dr Archana Thakur, Joint Secretary, UGC, New Delhi

Dr Thakur shared her appreciation towards the project for its contribution to the field of gender and HE in India. She then shared her inputs on how the UGC is supporting women in accessing and finishing HE. Dr Thakur shared with the audience all the schemes and

programs the UGC has initiated to ensure female participation in HE such as improving infrastructure by building more hostels for women; fellowships and scholarships schemes for women at PG, Doctoral and Post-doctoral level; setting up women's study centres in colleges across India; carrying out gender sensitisation programs in colleges and issuing advisories to HEIs across India to prevent gender-based violence and sexual harassment. The UGC has also taken steps to ensure a safe working environment for female employees in government colleges across India.

Shri Harshit Mishra, Deputy Adviser (Education), National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog)

Shri Mishra shared his thoughts on the topic next. He expressed his appreciation towards Fair Chance Foundation and University of Warwick for carrying out the study in Haryana and sharing the findings, especially in relation of the role of the families in HE choices and the focus on gendered trajectories to HE. He also noted that the role played by the government colleges as frontiers of access, as found by the study, was a crucial finding which will allow NITI Aayog to recommend an expansion of public colleges in India to enable more students from the massification generation to access HE easefully. He also pointed to the importance of 'trailblazers' as a contribution of the study to an understanding of the plight of students trying to access HE. He shared that he feels 'taster days' would be a useful intervention to employ to ensure informed choices. He assured the project team that he would be using the findings from the study in his appraisal notes and recommendations to the Department of Higher Education. He expressed his enthusiasm for having the opportunity to learn about the project and its findings and its policy implications going forward, especially when it relates to gendered choices in HE.

Dr. Rajinder Singh, Principal, Sanatan Dharma (SD) College, Ambala, Haryana

Dr Singh, who piloted the Outreach Activity Resource (OAR)² as part of the impact phase of the project, shared with the audience the process and outcome of the 'taster day' activity. 24 government schools were invited to the college for the 'taster day' in November 2021. Overall, approximately 600 students from class 11 and 12 and 60 staff attended the event. The taster day aimed to give students information about the college, course options, career paths, admissions process and fees by the college staff. The college also organised a campus tour which was led by student ambassadors from the college. Students were also given an information pack in the form of a CD which had details about admissions, financial aid and courses. Dr Singh shared that the event was a great success as it helped students gain valuable information as well as helped motivate them to access HE. He shared that they would like to invite parents to future outreach events. He also suggested that a few colleges could collaborate to organise a 'college fair' for students of a district where they could interact with multiple college staff in one place. He also suggested distribution of printed brochures and leaflets to help students avail reliable information about accessing HE. He also commented on the challenges created by online admissions for students as well as colleges and suggested an offline or hybrid model of admission.

² The OAR and the report of the two impact workshops held in Haryana are available at <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/law/research/projects/rlaaa3083/output/>



Open Discussion

The webinar was attended by *over 100 participants* representing educational policy makers, institutional leaders and administrators and academics from across India and beyond.

A summary of key points made in the discussion.

- A participant asked, because all government colleges have women's cells, could taster days be organised via these cells? The team responded that, while the involvement of women's cells in organising taster day is essential, however, the event should be a college-led event as opposed to a cell-led event as it aims to be inclusive to both men and women.
- It was noted that it is important to recognise the key role of HE teachers in enabling informed choice among students. The team stated that the next phase of the project is focused on this theme. The project had revealed the informal ways in which teachers are already carrying out outreach in their institutions.
- Another participants asked, what is the role of social capital on choice making? Had the project considered the impact of social capital? Important to recognise the triple jeopardy of deprivation that women face based on class, caste and gender (and religion). Had the study looked at the correlation between these? Had the project done any analysis on the impact of IT or mass media on choice making process among women? Dr Henderson responded that Dr Anjali Thomas and Ms Nikita Samanta (both project PhD students) were looking at the role of social capital in their respective doctoral research projects. The project was not designed to take a correlational approach but the research did find components of inequity for both men and women: men from marginalised groups have the pressure to earn earlier and hence are not accessing HE, and this is related to the common expectation of women to be less qualified than their husbands, so the expectation of women to access HE is also lower. She also noted that mass media has been shown to have a positive effect as women are accessing positive representations of women from films

and sports as role models. However, media also contribute to scaremongering which causes families to curb women's mobility and ability to access HE.

- It was asked if the project suggesting that women in India may not be making the right educational choices? The response was that women and their families often look for security of women when making college choices. The FCF study found that young women are often bargaining with families to have more choices, and in most cases they have only one choice. So, the issue is not women making 'wrong' choices; rather it is about the 'variety' of choices and information available to women.
- Another participant remarked that she found the study very interesting and shared the findings from her research (by Prof Karuna Chanana) on secondary education on parameters which were similar to this project. The FCF project recognises the importance of having a joined-up relationship between schools and colleges to enable better choices for students. At the moment the onus of providing support and information to students is largely on schools, and there needs to be a joint effort by both schools and colleges in order to facilitate informed choice by students.
- A participant asked, is it not important to recognise the state of unemployment in India? What is the role of vocational or skill education in HE? Prof. Varghese responded to this question to say that employment is not generated by the education sector but by the economic sector. The assumption should not be that education is responsible for unemployment. Dr Henderson added that the study is not advocating that everyone should access HE, but rather that everyone should have the ability to make an informed choice, not just about HE but all options available after schooling.
- Other research being conducted at NIEPA confirms that the role of trailblazers – identified in the FCF project – is more important in rural areas. Especially as girls in rural areas have very limited choices i.e. lack of STEM subjects at the school level.
- It was agreed that 'taster days' should be carried out from class 10 to provide information and guidance to students from an earlier stage, but such guidance and motivation should start from primary education (as occurs in some contexts in the UK).

Way forward

Prof Ann Stewart – FCF Project Principal Investigator, School of Law, University of Warwick, UK

Prof. Stewart shared some reflections on the wider significance of the contribution made by the project and also to reflect on the position of the UK in relation to widening participation. The FCF research contributes to both widening and deepening access and moves beyond gender parity to understand more nuanced ways in which disadvantages intersect to create barriers for young people and that such contextual research is necessary and useful for effective policy making.

The context for how disadvantage works needs to be understood in historically specific contexts – the USA is different to South Africa or India. She shared the UK policy and institutional frameworks in the UK. The UK does not have a written constitution and therefore has no constitutional guarantee of gender equality. It has an Equality Act 2010 which protects citizens against discrimination. This Act is then translated into policy based on disadvantages faced by certain communities such as black and ethnic minorities as well as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Gender disadvantages intersect with these disadvantages. The efforts to widen access to HE is therefore focused on these communities. She spoke about the regulatory bodies which provide the framework for widening participation as well as the incentives in place meaning institutions have to implement these policies in the UK. She used the example of the way in which widening participation is carried out at the Law School at University of Warwick. In conclusion, she shared her hope that the FCF study contributes to the development of higher education research more generally as well as be of use to policy makers in India.

Final remarks by the Webinar Chair

Professor N. V. Varghese, Vice-Chancellor, NIEPA, New Delhi

Prof Varghese offered some words in conclusion and shared that the project and its optimism towards the role of HE aligns with the ethos of NIEPA. He spoke to the role of knowledge production and knowledge consumption; he highlighted NIEPA's role in knowledge production and that he was glad NIEPA was able to collaborate with the FCF project to produce knowledge that will be useful and relevant to stakeholders at various levels: it has aided colleges in Haryana, it has contributed to the academic research, and the policy community in India, which was evident from the attendees and speakers at the webinar.

He spoke to the importance of evidence-based decision making in the policy space and congratulated the FCF team on endeavouring to, through their study, gather and share evidence based on analytical, qualitative data that has been examined by senior academics and researchers to ensure reliability and applicability, which he hopes will be useful to policy makers and practitioners alike in India. He shared how the process of ensuring fairness in any system aids democracy by removing inequities and encouraging justice, hence, the study has contributed greatly to ensuring a democratic process in HE by highlighting challenges faced at not only the policy level but also the household level and suggesting an evidence-based solution i.e. the taster day. He also alluded to the fact that the public sector in India is devalued due to the perception of poor quality however, this study has shown the importance of the public institutions in providing education to those who are most marginalised. He cited this to be an important and relevant conclusion to inform policy.

Vote of Thanks

Dr. Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Associate Professor, CPRHE/NIEPA, New Delhi

Dr Sabharwal shared a vote of thanks to all those who spoke at the webinar and all those who attended and participated to make the webinar as lively and interactive as it was. She also thanked all the staff at CPRHE/NIEPA who have supported the event on the scene and behind the scenes.

Conclusions

The FCF team was delighted and extremely grateful for the very insightful contributions from all the participants. The endorsement of key project findings – that gender continues to play a role in the way in which decisions are made in families and by young women and men and that government colleges can play a key role in enhancing informed choice and addressing these gender differences by national educational policy makers present at the webinar comments is particularly encouraging. The positive reception of ‘taster days’ both by those institutions within Haryana that had conducted the pilot and then by key national policy makers was also very welcome. We view the accepted invitation for Dr Rajinder (Singh) from SD College Ambala to present the piloted taster day based upon the OAR, and to share its success with national education policy makers was a very clear endorsement of our work.

We particularly welcomed the positive response of Dr Thakur and Mr Mishra to the findings of the research as presented and contained within our policy brief (Stewart et al., 2022) and for recognition of the contribution that the OAR could make to NEP 2020 implementation. A subsequent conversation with the present Secretary General Association of Indian Universities at the project’s Research Advisory Group meeting indicates that the idea of ‘taster days’ for encouraging institutional outreach activities in the context of accessing HE is gaining salience with policy makers.

We therefore consider that this was a very successful culmination of our impact activities. We have demonstrated the positive response to our research and the suggested policy recommendations contained in our Policy Brief at two local workshops in Haryana and this national workshop. Our partners in government colleges in Haryana have very successfully piloted a taster day using our OAR and have themselves recommended their use to regional and national policy makers.

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