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CONTENTS

Page No.

◊ **Vice Chancellor's Message – Prof. Najma Akhtar**

EDITORIAL 01

1 Animating Embroidered Memories - Nina Sabnani 03

2 Women and Higher Education Development in Post-Colonial Societies - Rhody-Ann Thorpe 10

3 COVID-19 Pandemic, Climate Change and Sustainable Development: A Gender Analysis - Vibhuti Patel 18

4 Being the "Muslim Lady" in the USA - Huma Ahmed-Ghosh 25

5 Lessons on Women and Their lives: The Hazards of Beauty and the Emphasis on Physical Appearances in the Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy - Monica Kanga T 34

6 Reconstructing Feminist Ecocriticism: A Critical Study of Amitav Ghosh's Selected Novels - Khadijatul Kaminy 41

7 New Reproductive Technologies and the Biopolitical Paradigm - Sapna Dudeja Taluja 48

8 Voices Treading the No Man's Land: A study of the Subversive Female Narratives in the Select Radio Plays of Angela Carter - Ananya Mukhopadhyay and Pallabi Chowdhury 55

9 Understanding the Alternate World: Reading Science Fiction by Women - Sumita Puri 62

10 Privacy and Dignity of Women Prisoners in India - Sohail Nazim and Kulsum Haider 69

11 Reading Subalternity: An Act of Radical Self-Critique - Rina Ramdev 76

12 Begum Hazrat Mahal and the Revolt of 1857: Some Reflections on Women's 'Self-Representation' in Politics - Tanya Burman 84

13 Negotiating Education, Community and Nation: Women Vanguards of Jamia Millia Islamia - Meher Fatima Hussian 90

BOOK REVIEWS

◊ *Women in Social Change: Vision, Struggles and Persisting Concerns* - Sumaiyah Naaz 97

◊ *Muthulakshmi Reddy: A Trailblazer in Surgery and Women's Rights* - Aishwarya Kumar 99

WOMEN AND HIGHER EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT IN POST-COLONIAL SOCIETIES

Rhody-Ann Thorpe

Abstract

The higher education landscape has known several transformations throughout the years. As the sector develops, so have discourses pertaining to the participation of women in higher education. However, discussions adopting a gendered approach in assessing the impact of colonial legacy on higher education development have been sparse. Indeed, the higher education systems of many independent nations originated in the colonial era and were not initially designed for a mixed public. Over time, there have been calls for the democratisation of education; and though education has been declared a human right since the 20th century, the right to higher education has received less attention. Consequently, higher education remains a domain that is still marked by gender inequality. As the impacts of colonialism are unequal, so are the means and efforts of tackling gender equality in higher education by formerly colonised nations. This paper, therefore, proposes to have a look at ways in which select post-colonial societies have approached higher education development with regards to women.

Introduction

For many decades, higher education has been gaining momentum as a policy focus area, thanks to its well documented benefits. On an individual level, correlations have been established between higher education and higher earnings, better health, and generational wealth (Baum and Ma, 2007). Higher earnings [and thus higher taxes], low unemployment and poverty rates, better health, less reliance on public assistance programmes and greater civic participation, are examples of some of the identified benefits for the society (Nietzel, 2020). Policymakers have thus been generating greater interest in the sector as a pathway for economic development; and international institutions such as the World Bank, have been increasing support for the higher education[i]. In fact, Mamta Murthi, World Bank's Vice President for Human Development has acknowledged the centrality of tertiary education to the development process but especially as a recovery tool for countries affected by the Covid-19 crisis, encouraging countries to "address the challenges brought by the pandemic, to build back better, more equitable, efficient, and resilient tertiary education systems" (World Bank, 2021).

If datasets allow us to laud the sector for its benefits from an economic standpoint, more attention should be given as it pertains to the participation of women in higher education. Higher education facilitates the advancement of women in several ways. It allows them to break glass ceilings and occupy leadership positions. It also brings women into the mainstream of development as they comprise part of a country's bank of skilled human resources, thus contributing greatly to the process of sustainable human development (Murtaza, 2012). Higher education also caters to the needs of women, including those situated in rural areas, by increasing their purchasing power parity. Murtaza (2012) has studied how social structures have resulted in the subordination of girls and women in Pakistan and how [higher] education plays a fundamental role in their empowerment.

If higher education bears many advantages, it is yet another sector that has historically been marked by gender inequality. In 2020, the UN Secretary General António Guterres labelled slavery and colonialism as "a stain on previous centuries" and announced that women's inequality should shame us all in the current century, calling for the twenty-first century "to be the century of women's equality" (UN Press, 2020). One may then question the state of higher education in formerly colonised nations as they not only have to contend with inherited structures from the imperial experience but also inherited ills, such as gender inequality. How have formerly colonised countries addressed the issue of gender inequality in higher education? This paper proposes to examine this question with a special focus on former British colonies.

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[i] The World Bank is the world's largest financier of education in the developing world.

Gender Disparity in Higher Education: Colonial Legacy

A legacy of colonialism is the way in which the education systems were modelled by the colonisers to suit their goals and to resemble European education systems (Ricketts, 2013). For former British colonies, these systems included tertiary education and the original British universities served as blueprints in imperial education policy pursuits. The colonial experience produced colonial universities, most of which were inherited by the nations following their independence. Gerrard and Shriprakash (2017) have noted that to "understand the role of education and schooling, is to understand the past and present knowledge practices, which were – and are – inextricably bound to colonization" (Gerrard & Sriprakash, 2017, p. 5). Therefore, looking at gender inequality *vis-à-vis* higher education in post-colonial societies must also involve looking into colonial experiences and practices.

The Oxbridge model has served as the basis for the establishment of many universities in former colonies. It is well known for its collegial structure, residential character, and its research ideal. However, at its origins, this model did not cater to the participation of women in higher education. Established in the 12th century, women were excluded from attending the University of Oxford for centuries. As McCrum (1994) recalls that in the 19th century, the efforts of women's leaders to establish higher education for women, and in particular to admit women to Oxford and Cambridge, was attacked systematically with the most extraordinary language. An example of this trenchant opposition may be found in the *Saturday Review* (1874), "we have a here a petty example of restless women constituting themselves leaders of their sex and endeavouring to induce others to follow a course which is opposed to the good sense and feelings of the vast majority of women (…). In the present instance we find it asserted that there is no reason why men and women should not pursue the same University distinctions and adopt the same professional pursuits (…)" (as cited in McCrum, 1994, p. 17). It was not until 1920 that Oxford accepted women as full members who were able to pursue the BA degree, although a quota on the number of women admitted existed from 1927 until 1957 (Ahlburg & McCall, 2020). Similar accounts of inequalities are given with regards to the University of Cambridge. However, the barriers to female participation in higher education were fewer at Cambridge because the university repealed its statute prohibiting mixed colleges in 1965 (Ahlburg & McCall, 2020).

In the colonies, universities were set up not only to respond to the needs of British settlers but also because it was perceived as the golden standard. In Ireland, arguably Britain's first colony, Trinity College Dublin (TCD) was created in 1592 by royal charter; and Queen Elizabeth I made it clear that Trinity College was to be built according to the Oxbridge model "we licence the provost and fellows of the said college that they may establish amongst themselves whatever well-constituted laws they may perceive in either of our universities of Oxford and Cambridge, provided that they shall consider them suitable for themselves" (Maxwell, 1946). For over three hundred years of its existence, TCD refused entry to women. Towards the end of the 19th century, this bar was challenged via a number of high-profile requests and although college authorities had mounted strident opposition to admit women, by 1904 capitulation proved the only viable option (Harford & Rush, 2010).

During expansive colonial pursuits, Britain continued to use the university system as a tool of cultural colonisation. In India, for example, colonial efforts in higher education were carried out initially through the East India company and later under direct British rule (Manjulata & Sapna, 2018). According to Basu (1989), the urban elite found that the Western secular education was an avenue to jobs and also that it had a special role to play in the social and political regeneration of India which would create the capacity for self-rule. The elites were the beneficiaries of this system and hence, had a vested interest in its continuance[ii]. Moreover, women were excluded from the group of elites who had access to higher institutions of learning. As Ghara (2016) notes, in India, women's entry into higher education and employment came via the nurturing professions – nursing and teaching towards the end of the last century, largely as a result of the efforts of social reformers to improve the lot of widows and other marginalised women.

A further example can be drawn using the higher education system in South Africa. As Mabokela (2001) explains, the postsecondary education sector was similarly plagued with pervasive inequities along race, class, and gender lines. The early universities created in the 1800s were "modelled after British institutions, and were primarily formed to prepare White male students for further educational training abroad" (Mabokela, 2001, p. 206). Moreover, interestingly, Gallagher and Morison (2019) clarify that, "historically" "all institutions were developed by, and for, men" but notes that it is only in the "mid-20th century" that women's access to universities was facilitated by "societal change" (as cited in Moodly, 2021, p. 188).

The "Feminization" of Higher Education

In Western societies, the participation of women in higher education may be perceived by some as commonplace. In fact, in many universities, there are progressively more women graduates than men. The increasing proportion of women in higher education may be referred to as 'feminization' and concerns the participation of women as consumers and as providers of higher education. For example, the topic of women and the 'feminization' of the teaching profession has been debated for decades, in some places for over a century but there has been a tendency for most explorations in this subject to come from countries in the North, such as the UK, Australia and Canada, or, more recently, from South America (Bourne, 2020).

In former colonies, more women have been able to enjoy access to education. In Ireland, for example, education has become a leveller for women to an important extent. As Aideen et al (2016) highlight, while half of all university undergraduate students are women, 54 per cent of postgraduate students are women. Moreover, the percentage of women aged 15- 64 attaining third level educational qualifications in Ireland had increased to a high level reaching 40 per cent in 2014, higher than the average rate across the 28 European Union countries (EU-28) which was 26 per cent (Quilty et al., n.d.). Though, this comes after years of lobbying and petitioning. Harford (2008) recalls how Irishwomen leaders (both Protestant and Catholic alike) following their exclusion from the classrooms of Ireland's leading universities on account of their sex, founded women's colleges designed to provide a separate but equal education to women as that offered in the all-male colleges and universities. They also continued to strive to secure the same rights as men in terms of access to university courses, examinations, degrees, and facilities. They were met with vociferous opposition at each step of the way. Their eventual success at winning access by the early years of the twentieth century to the most elite and conservative institution, Trinity College Dublin, is thus a remarkable achievement. However, their integration into the college, like their admission, was also slow, first securing access to degrees in arts and medicine and later to more traditionally male dominated fields like engineering. They were prohibited from residing in the college and were expected to leave the campus by six every evening. They accounted for about 15 per cent of the student cohort by 1914, coming predominantly from Protestant middle class and professional families. By the early years of the twentieth century, the long struggle for equal educational rights for women had succeeded in securing access to Irish universities for qualified females (Nolan, 2008). The opening up of universities to women in Britain and the United States as well as a "rising sympathy with the claim for women's admission' both within the college itself and among the wider public left authorities with no option but to concede" (Harford & Rush, 2010, p. 19). A significant milestone also came with the Irish Universities Act, which conferred on women equality with men in all matters relating to university education (Harford, 2008).

[ii] India is believed to have had a functioning system of higher education as early as 1000 B.C. Unlike present day universities, these ancient learning centers were primarily concerned with dispersing Vedic education. The modern Indian Education system finds its roots in colonial legacy (Manjulata and Sapna, 2018).

In India, women have also been able to benefit from the expansion of higher education opportunities. Indeed, India's higher education system is the third largest in the world, next to that of the United States and China. In the decade from 2000-01 to 2010-11, the Indian higher education system has grown at a fast pace by adding nearly 20,000 colleges and more than 8 million students, with women making up 24-50 per cent of higher education enrolment (Sharma, 2018). However, women had to wait until the twentieth century to be adequately considered in policy plans for the tertiary sector. Reference can be made to the report of the University Commission of 1947, which as a recommendation noted that "women's present education is entirely irrelevant to the life they have to lead. It is not only a waste but often a definite disability" (Report of the University Education Commission, Government of India, 1948-49, Vol. (i), chapter XII, as cited in Nath, 2014, p. 44). According to Nath (2014), access to higher education by women in India is mainly a post-independence phenomenon, noting that "on the eve of the independence the women enrolment was less than 10 per cent of the total enrolment but in the academic year 2010-11 women enrolment increased up to 41.5 per cent" (Nath, 2014, p. 45). Indeed, as Chanana (2000) also notes, the development strategy in independent India, in the 1950s, depended heavily on planning, with the first two Five Year Plans addressing the problems of women's education and sought to link higher professional education and occupations. Moreover, the Report of the Committee on the Education of Women, 1959, made extensive recommendations which led to a more focused thrust in the subsequent plans. Chanana (2000) further pointed out that in 1993-94 women constituted "52 per cent of students who were enroled in faculties of education, i.e., teacher training departments and that their enrolment in other traditionally male-dominated fields of study has increased throughout the years" (Chanana, 2000, p. 1012).

In South Africa, the situation is quite different in the sense that efforts to grant women equal access to education were not immediately forthcoming in the post-independence era. As Mabokela and Mlambo (2017) argued, two decades following South Africa's transition to democracy, higher education policies under review had not effectively addressed and redressed apartheid inequalities and thus, Black South African, women, and other historically disadvantaged groups remain marginalised in higher education spaces. Nevertheless, some efforts can be identified such as the policy implemented which required universities to enrol students and staff which reflect the demographic reality of the country, in order to ensure equity in higher education. The authors noted that emphasis was also placed on increasing the representation of Black people and women in academic and administrative senior positions in the academy. Moreover, institutions would have to report how they have improved staff equity in conformity to the Employment Equity Act[iii]. In terms of gender enrolment patterns, more women have enroled in higher education since 1994. Women account for over 50 per cent of students enroled in residential universities around the country (Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017).

[iii] 1998 Employment Equity Act: States that if an individual is from the following groups: women, Black, and disabled and they have the minimum qualifications of the job or has the capacity (in the future) to acquire these skills he or she must be considered for the job. Also, the employer must provide adequate training and skills development for affirmative action appointees to obtain skills required for a position.

Tackling Gender Inequality in Higher Education in the 21st Century

The issue of gender equality in higher education has not evaded formerly colonised nations. Varied efforts have been made to address this, which have mostly come in the form of increasing access to women for tertiary education. The statistics have shown that globally this policy response has been adopted although not at a uniformed pace, which has resulted in more and more women pursuing higher education. In Ireland, efforts for gender equality have allowed women to climb academic echelons on different occasions. In fact, in 2021 Professor Linda Doyle was appointed as Provost of Trinity College, Dublin after an all-female election, 117 years after women were admitted to Trinity College (Daly, 2022). It is noteworthy that Professor Doyle's appointment came two years after a charter to promote gender equality in the university sector was formally launched by Minister of State for Higher Education, Mary Mitchell O'Connor at an event hosted by Trinity College Dublin (Tyrell, 2019).

Though, it is important to note that this reality is not reflected across all post-colonial societies. One may look to the Caribbean, for instance, where the University of the West Indies (UWI) is an interesting case in point. The regional university was first established in Jamaica as a college of the University of London and as opposed to the previous instances where women were excluded from entry, the university on the contrary was mixed. Indeed, of the 33 graduates pursuing a degree in medicine, 12 were women. The phenomenon of feminisation was also observed at the university as statistics revealed that between 2009 and 2016 approximately "70 per cent of students who enrolled at the University of the West Indies were women" (Bourne, 2020, p. 33). However, if women participation in higher education has been a non-issue since the university's inception, other forms of gender inequality have been identified. As Williams and Harvey (1993) have highlighted, it is ironic that the "university, a vital part of the education sector that is expected to play a proactive role in achieving the goals of equality of opportunity in the society, is itself facing the acute problem of gender inequity in respect of overall representation of women in the faculty and administrative staff, and especially in top management" (Williams and Harvey, 1993, p. 188). The authors hypothesise that this could be attributable to the fact that their relatively late entry to university employment means that they take longer to gain tenured positions, a condition for contesting the elections for faculty administrative positions. During their assessment, Williams and Harvey (1993) noted that at the time women made up only 4.3 per cent of the professorial rank, compared with 22.9 per cent of the university's total teaching staff. However, their representation in the administrative ranks was significantly better in that they make up 55 per cent of the staff (Williams & Harvey, 1993). This issue was once again brought to the fore in 2021 via a report in *The Gleaner* which highlighted the fact that women comprise less than a third of the total number of professors among four of Jamaica's top universities and the fact that "the UWI has never had a women head" (Johnson, 2021).

Regarding the Indian context, Basantia and Devi (2022) looked at educational practices of higher education institutions of Northeast India and concluded that gender issues are still present in both professional and non-professional higher education establishments. According to authors these issues may be seen in different facets of [higher] education such as "educational enrolment; the appointment and promotion of teaching staff; and providing educational facilities in terms of study materials, academic support, etc., gender issues can be seen" (Basantia & Devi, 2022, p. 218). Moreover, these issues are reflected in educational institutions in different forms such as "sexual harassment, undue preference to same or opposite gender, undue criticism of harassment of the same or opposite gender, etc." (Basantia & Devi, 2022, p. 218). In terms of the participation of women in higher education, Ghosh and Kundu (2021) studied 16 Indian states from 2011 to 2019. Their findings showed that even though participation has increased throughout the years, "enrolment in postgraduation of study in India is not impressive" (Ghosh & Kundu, 2021, p. 281).

In South Africa, gender inequality remains a flaw that impacts the tertiary education sector. Many efforts have been made to allow women to make massive contributions in the area of higher education, but their role continues to be "constrained, undervalued and misapprehended as they continue to be regarded inferior to their male counterparts" (Mhlanga, 2013, as cited Mdleleni et al., 2021, p. 129). Data from the Council for Higher Education (2017) shows that of the 3,040 senior managers in higher education, only 44.76 per cent were females. Moreover, female academics formed 29 per cent of professors, 41 per cent of associate professors and 46 per cent of senior lecturers. However, at the level of lecturer and junior lecturer, the majority were women (as cited in Mdleleni et al., 2021). According to Mdleleni et al (2021), the fundamental issues highlighted by this data are that although women make up the mainstream of the staff, their representation at executive levels is relatively truncated; and that these statistics "overlooked the realities and lack deep interrogation and understanding of the higher education environment that women work in, which remains conducive for systemic gender prejudice" (Mdleleni et al., 2021, p. 129). They posit that as a result, higher education fails to implement transformation and address the way in which gender injustice remains persistent in higher education.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to succinctly demonstrate that the question of gender inequality in higher education is universal. For former colonies, however, the colonial experience is an added layer as they inherited university model systems characterised by the exclusion of women. In many of these nations, access to higher education by women has been made possible in some instances prior to independence; however, observations show that this access has been extended mostly in the post-independence period. The 'Feminization' of higher education is a resulting trend that can be noticed globally and one that is ongoing. Nevertheless, gender equality in the 21st century takes on a multidimensional form which includes barriers for women regarding leadership positions, research grants, among other things. In order for the 21st century to be the century for gender equality, as announced by António Guterres, a global and comprehensive approach targeting the tertiary sector in post-colonial societies should not be neglected.

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About the author:

Originally from Jamaica, Rhody-Ann Thorpe is a full-time lecturer at the Institute of Political Science in Lille, France and she is pursuing a PhD at the University of the Littoral Opal Coast. Her research is centred around Higher Education Policies in Post-Colonial societies.