

Decoding Choices: Unraveling the Complexities of Women's Educational and Career Paths

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Abstract

Examining the complex network of gender inequality in education, this academic research sheds light on the puzzling phenomena of women's academic excellence met with unequal acknowledgment. This study challenges preconceived beliefs and provided nuanced insights regarding women's educational successes by examining four hypotheses: Reference-Group Theory, Pollyanna Theory, Social Powerlessness Hypothesis, and Assumptions of Cultural Changes. The data shows that women are more academically successful than men, with higher enrollment and more achievements across various fields, which goes against popular belief. Gender stratification still exists in some industries, even though there have been improvements, and this makes one wonder if women are fairly compensated for their efforts. The study analyzes hypotheses concerning women's motives and societal views to decipher the intricacies of marital compatibility, professional ambitions, and personal fulfillment. The research offers a thorough grasp of gender dynamics in education by tackling these theories' shortcomings and considering cultural factors, systematic discrimination, and resource accessibility. The study uses a mixed-methods strategy, integrating quantitative trends in schooling with qualitative observations from a wide range of participants. This combination of methods strengthens our findings and helps us comprehend more fully the complex issues women encounter in the workplace and classroom. This study encourages readers to explore the interconnectedness of gender, education, and societal norms, advocating for a reassessment of current frameworks and the formulation of more comprehensive approaches to promote gender parity in the field of teaching and other domains.

Keywords: Gender Stratification, Gender Inequality in Education, Women's Academic Excellence, Women's Educational and Career Paths.

1. Introduction

A confusing incongruity remains in education: women frequently outperform males in academic achievement, but their educational qualifications often yield fewer rewards (Hermansen & Penner, 2022). To clarify this paradox, this article begins with a detailed examination, delving into four possibilities and methodically evaluating empirical evidence. As evidence accumulates, it becomes clear that women not only match but often outperform males in academic achievements, completely demolishing the longstanding myth of female underachievement (Moorhouse, 2022).

A thorough study of many statistics reveals a shifting picture in which women currently exceed males in acquiring university degrees (Croix & Vitale, 2023). Furthermore, progress is being made in closing enrollment gaps in professional and Ph.D. programs. While certain areas struggle with gender imbalances, with technical fields preferring men and social sciences and humanities favoring women, these disparities are narrowing, particularly among students.

Educators and academics must scrutinize women's achievement and attainment for two reasons. Firstly, it goes beyond mere academic interest; it acknowledges that the key to economic opportunity lies in closing the gender gap in well-paying professions, especially in traditionally male-dominated areas like science and mathematics (Cherney, 2023; Patel, Young, Schleifer, & Brauer, 2023). Secondly, there is a troubling contradiction between women's educational progress and the compensation they receive in the occupational sphere, which highlights the chasm between educational attainment and inequality in the workplace (Hu, Lyu, Pan, & Xu, 2023). To understand why women's academic success does not automatically convert into equal pay in the larger society, this article delves into the nuances of gender disparity in the workplace and colleges.

Women succeed academically despite the widespread belief that they would put less effort into their education due to fewer possibilities (Zhu, 2022; Potratz, 2022). Examining the reasons for this gender stratification in the opportunity structure, the paper gives empirical evidence to evaluate several ideas. For future studies on women's academic success, it also uses a new feminist philosophy.

Compared to minority and working-class children, female students' academic accomplishment is distinct. Minority and working-class students underachieve because they do not see a significant return on their investment in education, according to research (Pan, 2022; Gao & Adamson, 2022; Moats, 2022). The research in this area was impacted by the work of Ogbu (1979), who argued that parents from marginalized groups are aware of the restricted changes that affect their children's academic performance.

According to Ogbu, members of historically oppressed groups experience a "job ceiling" that prevents them from moving up the corporate ladder and into better jobs (Ogbu, 1979). Their children put in less effort and do worse academically than students from socially dominant groups because they are aware of the limited opportunities available to them. Furthermore, they believe that the job ceiling faced by minority individuals influences their sense of the value of schooling and its potential rewards, adding to educational underachievement.

As a result of this belief, they put less time and energy into their schooling, which shows their grades being lower than those of more dominating social groups. It appears that gender stratification in the opportunity structure does not significantly impact the academic achievement of young women, as they persist in achieving academic success while encountering comparable obstacles.

Mickelson (1989) undertook a study to put Ogbu's argument on minority underachievement to the test and broadened the research to include class and gender as additional factors. The study included a survey from senior students from different public high schools. They were asked to complete a questionnaire about their family history, educational goals, and attitudes toward education. The objective was to examine the correlation between students' views on education and their GPAs in high school and the effect of gender and class on the different occupational returns on education.

As the literature indicates, students have abstract and concrete attitudes about schooling. The prevalent concept of educational mobility is based on abstract sentiments, which are widely held but do not predict achievement behavior. However, students' academic performance is more strongly impacted by their concrete attitudes, which are formed by their varied experiences with the returns on education from the opportunity structure.

When considering gender inequality, career opportunities, and women's educational attainment, an oddity emerges. It implies that people's academic efforts are influenced by their expectations of future occupational rewards and that this sensitivity is strongest among those aware of the reality of the opportunity structure. Nevertheless, women continue to excel intellectually, which is unusual, even if the return on investment in their education is relatively low in the workplace. This study examines the impact of this anomaly on women's educational and vocational results, specifically looking at how these outcomes vary by class.

Examines studies on women's educational and occupational results, particularly those focusing on race and class disparities, to comprehend the exceptional nature of women's educational attainment. Despite the growing recognition of women's contributions to academia and the workforce, this paper notes that women's experiences have been largely ignored or dismissed in sociological studies. This section offers a synopsis of these studies, which help to clarify the nuances of women's educational opportunities and job prospects about gender.

Academic success differences between men and women can be influenced by age and the type of cognitive tasks engaged. Girls, for example, outperform boys until adolescence, but junior high school's competitive and individualistic learning environment, such as cooperative group work, may work against their strengths. Regarding verbal skills, girls typically do better than boys, even though boys do better in mathematical and visual-spatial tasks. Furthermore, there are gender disparities in the elective courses high school students choose to take. This is especially true in vocational education, where male students choose to enroll in more advanced math and scientific classes.

According to several studies, different courses taken by boys and girls may explain why they perform differently quantitatively. The idea that girls are inherently unmotivated and unable to succeed has evolved into something more mystical than reality. Women have just as much, if not more, drive to succeed as men, including academic success.

In the past, there was a disparity in educational attainment between men and women, with men having higher levels of education. But nowadays, high school graduation rates are higher among women than males. At the undergraduate and graduate levels, there is a gender gap in the courses chosen. Women are less likely to major in science or a professional career. School counselling techniques and course placement are two variables that can impact these variations.

Pakistan being underdeveloped has fewer resources allocated for education as Pakistan has the lowest budget allocation for education in South Asia. The literacy rate is also poor and there required a huge funding to promote education in the country (Raza et al., 2021). Historically, middle-class women relied on their husbands' income and saw their position as homemakers. Therefore, many only pursued education in high school. But since the "family wage" began to dwindle in the last couple of decades, social and economic shifts have made credentials for jobs and higher education more important for women in the middle and working classes. As a result of this change, women are now

more encouraged than ever to pursue employment outside the house.

Women have a wider income disparity and are underrepresented in management posts than men, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey. Despite being 44% of the workforce in 2021, women had 41% of management jobs. Management salaries were 77 cents per hour for women and 82 cents for men. There are industries where women earn less than men. These include businesses, government, and nonprofits. Racial and ethnic minority women earned more than White women. Male bachelor's degree holders earn 70 cents every dollar, while females earn 66 cents. The gender wage disparity was widest for women with a high school diploma or less, however it did widen with each level of education. These disparities continued to exist despite accounting for various factors such as seniority, education, age, vocational training, and other characteristics. The study brings attention to the disparities in education outcomes for individuals from working-class backgrounds, women, and minorities. It suggests that sex-segregated labor markets and career ladders play a role in perpetuating these inequalities.

Gender segregation in labor markets contributes to the perpetuation of unequal returns on education, as it leads to distinct career paths and limited opportunities for advancement for men and women (GAO, 2022). The U.S. Census Bureau found that full-time, year-round working women earned 84% of men's wages in 2021. Educational achievement, occupational segregation, and job experience drive the gender wage gap. Women are overrepresented in lower-paying employment despite greater representation in higher-paying ones, which may contribute to income discrepancies (Aragao, 2023).

Even though women and men have comparable rates of career mobility, the facts indicate that institutional and personal factors influence their promotions in different ways. For example, men have better access to mentors and are likelier to be promoted if they hold line jobs. In contrast, women are more likely to be enabled if they work in larger organizations.

The research delves into the subject of why women persist in seeking education despite the minimal benefits that may be gained. We shall go deeper into its four hypotheses for this phenomenon one by one.

2. Reference-Group Hypothesis

A reference group theory of self-concept suggests that people compare their economic, intellectual, social, and cultural accomplishments to those of their reference group. A reference group theory of values, on the other hand, proposes that people embrace the values represented by the majority in their reference group. [presented by US sociologist Herbert H. Hyman in 1942]. According to reference-group theory, women, unlike men, compare themselves to other women when deciding whether an investment in education has been worthwhile (Mijs & Nieuwenhuis, 2022). In women's minds, furthering one's education is a surefire way to advance in one of the two gender-specific occupational frameworks. Although women and men have similar rates of incremental return on education, women have a lower starting point in the opportunity structure and fewer internal career ladders in female-dominated occupations compared to male-dominated industries, according to empirical data (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2007).

The reference-group theory posits that women may not view the unequal returns on education experienced by their mothers, aunts, and older sisters as unjust because they assess these returns

through the lens of a gender-segregated occupational system. Education may seem like a good investment for a woman if she sees that it helped her role model go from a low-status, labor-intensive profession to a higher-status, pink-collar one. Indeed, this is in line with the stories of numerous women who, over the last two decades, have been able to climb the corporate ladder from entry-level jobs like cafeteria worker to secretary, teacher, or even registered nurse.

The author indirectly tested the reference-group hypothesis by surveying high school seniors about their career goals. The results demonstrated that young women's occupational choices reflected the sex-segregated occupational structure, with socioeconomic status being the primary determinant of career choices rather than gender. For example, pupils from the middle class wanted to be CEOs, while working-class pupils wanted to be computer scientists.

The disparity in career goals between middle-class and working-class students supports the claim that working-class individuals frequently select technical and engineering careers for upward mobility. It also emphasizes typical gender tendencies in vocational choices, with particular occupations more prevalent among male or female pupils. However, gender stereotypes are less prominent in the medical, computer science, accounting, and business management professions.

The results show that while gender gaps in vocational goals have diminished, traditional gender patterns remain. Women are progressively leaving formal employment, especially in professional and business-executive positions. However, there are still significant gender gaps in career choices below the highest echelons of the occupational hierarchy. Many girls in the study preferred careers typically associated with women, whereas boys preferred activities usually associated with men.

3. The Pollyanna Hypothesis

The Pollyanna principle (also called Pollyannaism or positivity bias) is the tendency for people to remember pleasant items more accurately than unpleasant ones (Boucher & Osgood, 1969). According to the rationale, optimism about the future is common among high school female graduates. Even though they are aware of the fact that earlier generations faced sexism, they believe that the women's movement has solved this issue. Because of their narrow worldview and historical circumstances, they fail to see the advancements toward gender equality in mainstream social institutions such as the media and their high school.

Because they have not yet seen realities that contradict the ideals of gender equality, teenage girls have a positive outlook on the prospects for women in the home and the job. This optimism is motivated by their idea that their education would be treated similarly to that of males and that their professions will not be jeopardized by family duties in dual-career couples due to the expectation of equal collaboration. This idea is indirectly confirmed by a longitudinal study investigating young women's attitudes, demonstrating a shift in the degree to which they believe in and desire gender equity.

The shifts in viewpoint among young women on gender equality, professional duties, and career advancement from 1975 to 1985. Although their perspectives on these issues altered significantly, their opinions on marriage and the importance of having children remained unchanged. The weakening of support for patriarchal family structures and the rising acceptability of women working outside the home, even with small children.

Based on the data, today's female high school grads hope to start families and advance professionally

without sacrificing either (Hill, 2020). By comparing 1990 and 2020, we can see that young women are now more hopeful about their opportunities for leadership roles in fields where males have historically had sway (Dashper, 2020; Taft, 2020). They anticipate compensation commensurate with their expertise, education, and training and firmly believe in the idea of equal opportunity.

According to the Pollyanna hypothesis, today's young women think there are fewer obstacles to having successful professions outside the house and in the workplace. Because of this assumption, women may be more confident in their abilities to achieve academically, which may explain why they outperform men who have completed similar programs. To dispel the myth that the battle for gender equality has been won, more comparable cases and legal actions against sexism may be required to address the gender-segregated occupational structure, wage gaps, and challenges faced by women in balancing career, marriage, and motherhood.

4. Social Powerlessness Hypothesis

The sense of powerlessness is the feeling of helplessness arises from the belief that one cannot alter the course of one's life or the lives of others and that control lies with external forces, strong individuals, luck, or destiny (Fromm, 2023). According to the social powerlessness theory, women may intentionally forego a profession in favor of marriage because of the systemic inequality they face in the workplace (Mathews & Manago, 2019). Realizing they might not get equal pay for their degree; women look for husbands as a means to social and financial stability. The importance of education is recognized not only for its impact on one's job but also for its significance in finding a suitable mate (Brinton & Oh, 2019).

Women, especially those from middle-class families, have a better chance of meeting future husbands who can provide for their families if they do well in high school. Rather than gauging the social returns of their education in the workplace, middle-class women look to marriage as a means to preserve their social standing and way of life (Piotrowski, Kalleberg, & Rindfuss, 2015). This theory is equally relevant for affluent women who believe a bachelor's degree is necessary to fulfill their responsibilities as hosts, social activists, and primary caregivers for their children's social development.

There are several reasons why white working-class women perceive marriage as a better option than a profession (Kim, Lee, Oh, & Lee, 2019). When these girls and women see no other way out of their abusive homes and low incomes, they may marry young to secure their financial futures rather than pursue their dreams of further education and professional independence. Additionally, some students strive to match into the middle class by doing well in high school and going to college to meet people from higher social classes.

5. Gender Role Socialization Hypothesis

One possible explanation for the discrepancy in women's achievement is the influence of gender-role socialization (Eccles, 1986; Fiorilli, Barni, Endendijk, & Retelsdorf, 2022). According to this idea, boys are motivated by mastery and intrinsic incentives, while girls are motivated by social approval and extrinsic rewards. The motivation for achievement in women is believed to originate from early childhood needs for love and acceptance, which highlights their focus on others. In contrast, men's motivation is driven by a desire for mastery and self-gratification.

According to the gender-role socialization hypothesis, girls do well in school because they are socialized to be "good girls" who obey instructions, follow the rules, and seek praise from others. This is more in line with conventional female gender norms. When compared to boys, whose early socialization emphasizes developing mastery and self-reliance, girls' motivation for achievement is shaped by an emphasis on dependence and seeking affection (Qing, 2020).

While the female gender role emphasizes academic excellence, the male gender role, particularly among working-class boys, necessitates a specific resistance to authority figures such as teachers and devalues schoolwork as "feminine." This cultural expectation may play a role in the academic underachievement of confident boys, as conforming to the expectations of being a "good student" may be perceived as behaving femininely. It is worth mentioning that boys have different ways of showing their learning, which may only sometimes match the criteria for achieving high grades (Somani, 2023).

There are notable disparities in grade-point averages between working-class students, specifically when examining working-class males and females. The observed differences are consistent with the sex-role socialization hypothesis, indicating that boys in working-class communities may experience some level of academic underachievement due to their socialization. In addition, male students often prioritize entering family businesses rather than focusing on academic achievement. This observation further underscores the impact of socialization on educational attitudes and outcomes.

6. Discussion

The mystery of why female students outperforms male students academically despite the less tangible benefits of their education still needs to be answered. Higher wages and more employment options are the primary motivators for men to get degrees, but this is only sometimes the case for women. The four theories cast light on the subject from different angles but need to answer the central question of why women succeed academically.

The four theories analyze the factors that contribute to women's academic success. These theories provide new angles, yet they all fall short in meaningful ways. The inability to discuss the accomplishment and attainment behavior of women from different ethnic and socioeconomic origins is a significant constraint. Feminist theory can inform future studies by arguing that we must look at women's experiences firsthand and question the old divisions between the public and private sectors to comprehend their accomplishments fully.

According to reference-group theory, people perceive their status and happiness by comparing it to that of their reference groups, which are other social group members. This hypothesis suggests that women may not give higher education the priority it deserves despite being aware of the benefits it offers males. But this presumption demands a massive leap of faith on the part of women since it presumes, they are fully aware of the fact that men gain more from schooling than women do. Furthermore, it presupposes that women intentionally disregard those advantages due to factors like personal preferences or societal norms. In addition, the Pollyanna theory and the social helplessness hypothesis cannot be accepted as valid explanations for the observed gender-segregated occupational structure. Despite claims to the contrary made by proponents of the Pollyanna theory, data reveals that gender discrepancies in many industries exist to this day. This points to pervasive prejudices or obstacles that make it hard for women to advance in particular fields. The social powerlessness hypothesis challenges the idea that women pursue higher education mainly to advance their careers rather than improve their

marital prospects. According to this theory, traditional gender roles in society value marriageability more than professional achievement for women. Regardless of gender, there are various reasons why people pursue higher education, such as satisfying one's needs and developing one's career prospects.

In short, reference-group theory proposes awareness but does not prioritize it. If you get into this concept, you're essentially saying that women are well aware of the educational advantages men enjoy and have made the deliberate choice to ignore them. - A Since the Pollyanna theory presupposes that sex-segregated professional institutions no longer exist; their existence casts doubt on that assumption. Disparities between the sexes in representation in different industries point to pervasive prejudice and discrimination. - The Assumption that women's educational performance is mainly motivated by goals for lovely marriages rather than careers is argued against by the social powerlessness hypothesis. It implies that marriageability is typically given greater weight by society when it comes to women. Personal fulfillment and career aspirations are two examples of the many possible individual reasons people pursue higher education, and these reasons do not discriminate based on gender. When looking at gender gaps in education and employment, it's crucial to assess these ideas critically and incorporate other variables such as cultural effects, systematic discrimination, and resource and opportunity availability. We can create more thorough plans to ensure that people of different gender identities have equitable access to educational opportunities and job advancement possibilities if we have a better grasp of these nuances.

7. Conclusions

Gender disparities in education and employment are complicated and comprehending them necessitates taking into account all of the variables at play. The ideas explored here call into question the concept of gender-neutral settings and individual desires, while also shedding light on the intricate nature of women's decision-making processes. These findings emphasize the need to recognize the different variables that contribute to gender inequality and moving away from simplified narratives.

It is critical to question perceptions in order to break down barriers. By reference-group theory, we are made to believe that women intentionally overlook men's educational advantages, and by Pollyanna theory, we are persuaded to believe that sex-segregated institutions no longer exist. Similarly, the social powerlessness hypothesis questions the oversimplified idea that marriage goals are the sole motivators for women's academic accomplishment. All of these notions indicate the importance of delving further into the complexity of gender roles in the workplace and school.

The fact that personal fulfillment and work aspirations are acknowledged as major drivers for higher education emphasizes the significance of individual agency. The fact that women's actions are influenced by a wide variety of different and unique conditions, including gender-based discrimination, emphasizes the need for individualized measures to defend personal goals.

8. Recommendations

To address these complexities, institutions and legislators must develop comprehensive plans. Addressing gender disparity requires addressing the core reasons, which include cultural, structural, and resource-related challenges. Raising public awareness and education is critical for debunking gender stereotypes, establishing a friendly environment for people of all backgrounds to pursue their talents, and encouraging women to break into male-dominated sectors.

It is vital that resources are distributed fairly. Equal educational and employment opportunities for all people, regardless of gender, are critical for overcoming structural barriers. To promote diversity and inclusion in the workplace and school, inclusive policies that address the complexities of gender relations should be developed and implemented.

Continuous research and data collection are essential for successfully adapting to shifting trends. We can all work together to create a more equitable future without gender bias if we prioritize and strive for these proposals.

9. Limitations of the Study

Drawing broad conclusions is difficult because the concepts under investigation are highly contextualized and specialized. The study might not have captured all gender differences despite the helpful insights supplied by reference-group theory and Pollyanna theory.

The authors acknowledge that social and cultural norms may restrict the study's usefulness. It should have taken individual experiences and intersectionality into account. Social mores and political stances are constantly shifting, so the study's findings may only hold in some places. Gender changes necessitate ongoing evaluations and adjustments.

The study aims to present a balanced view. However, it is possible that preconceived ideas from preexisting social narratives and academic frameworks impacted the results. Although complete objectivity is unattainable, the study highlights the need to minimize prejudice.

It is possible that effective strategies for lowering gender disparity were ignored in the study. Academics and politicians should consider all pertinent ideas in this area in the future.

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