



Changing Family Roles and Societal Engagement of Educated Women: A Study from Nadia District, West Bengal

Siuli Mandi ¹, Dr. Anamika Shrivastava ²

^{1,2} Department of Education, Mansarovar Global University, Sehore, MP

Abstract

The present study examined the changing family roles and societal engagement of educated women in Nadia District, with a focus on how education shapes women's self-identity, perceptions of intergenerational family norms, and the quality of familial support. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study explored the lived experiences of women who had completed secondary or higher education across rural, semi-urban, and urban contexts. The findings revealed that educated women largely interpret education as a source of confidence, awareness, and agency that enables them to renegotiate traditional family roles, though this process is often constrained by persistent patriarchal expectations. Participants perceived noticeable yet uneven changes in family norms across generations, with greater acceptance of women's education and decision-making alongside continued emphasis on caregiving responsibilities. The study further highlighted that the quality of familial support—particularly emotional encouragement, shared responsibilities, and recognition of aspirations—plays a decisive role in enabling women to balance family roles and societal participation. Overall, the study underscores that while education is a critical catalyst for change, its transformative potential is closely linked to supportive family environments and evolving social attitudes.

Keywords: Educated women, family roles, self-identity, familial support, intergenerational norms, societal engagement.

1. Introduction

The changing role of educated women within the family and society has emerged as a significant area of academic inquiry in India, particularly in regions where traditional norms coexist with expanding educational opportunities. Education is an instrument for women's empowerment, enabling greater autonomy, decision-making capacity, and participation in public life (Sen, 1999). Higher educational attainment does not automatically dismantle entrenched gender roles, especially within the family sphere, where women continue to bear primary responsibility for caregiving and domestic work (Desai & Andrist, 2010). In many parts of India, women's societal engagement remains closely mediated by

familial expectations, marriage patterns, and socio-cultural prescriptions regarding appropriate gender behavior (Kabeer, 2005).

In the context of Nadia District, these dynamics acquire particular significance due to the district's mixed rural–urban character and its uneven socio-economic development. Census-based depicted female literacy rates in Nadia have improved substantially over the decades, women's work participation and public engagement remain comparatively low, reflecting persistent structural and cultural constraints (Ghosh & Mistri, 2015). Early marriage, economic dependency, and caste-based inequalities further complicate the translation of education into meaningful social participation for women (Mandal & Adhikari, 2023). At the same time, educated women increasingly express aspirations for professional careers, civic involvement, and shared family responsibilities (Singh, 2022).

Women's societal engagement by the availability of family support and broader social acceptance of changing gender roles (Chatterjee, Desai, & Vanneman, 2019). National-level attitudinal surveys reveal a growing endorsement of shared roles between men and women in childcare and earning, yet traditional expectations continue to exert strong influence at the household level (Pew Research Center, 2022). Thus how educated women in Nadia District perceive changing family roles and negotiate their engagement with society, thereby contributing to a nuanced understanding of the gap between educational advancement and substantive gender equality.

1.1. The Emergence of the Study

The present study emerged from the improvements in women's educational attainment, educated women continue to experience constraints in redefining their family roles and expanding their societal engagement, particularly in semi-urban and rural regions such as Nadia District. While education has enhanced awareness, aspirations, and decision-making capacities among women, deeply rooted patriarchal norms, unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities, restrict the practical application of these gains. The literacy rates and workforce participation, leaving a gap in understanding how educated women themselves perceive and negotiate changing family expectations alongside opportunities for social participation. The emergence of this study is thus grounded in the need to examine the lived experiences of educated women in Nadia District, where traditional family structures intersect with evolving socio-economic conditions, to better understand the dynamics shaping women's roles and engagement with the broader society.

1.2. The Statement of the Problem

The rising levels of female education, educated women in Nadia District continue to face persistent constraints in redefining their family roles and societal engagement. Traditional gender norms and patriarchal family structures often assign women primary responsibility for domestic and caregiving duties. These expectations limit the effective utilization of education for career advancement and social participation. Educational gains frequently coexist with challenges such as early marriage, economic dependency, and inadequate family support. The problem lies in understanding how educated women perceive and negotiate these intersecting family in the regional context.

1.3. The Significance of the Study

Present study lies to forecast the nuanced experiences and perceptions of educated women regarding the changing meaning of education, evolving family norms, and the quality of familial support in shaping their roles and self-identity. By focusing on educated women in Nadia District, the study moves beyond quantitative indicators of literacy to explore deeper socio-cultural dynamics within families across generations. In designing gender-sensitive interventions that strengthen family support systems and promote women's empowerment at the grassroots level thus the findings were characterised.

1.4. The Research Questions

RQ1: How do educated women interpret the meaning of education in shaping their family roles and self-identity?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of educated women regarding changing family norms across generations?

RQ3: How do educated women perceive the quality of familial support they receive in the context of changing family roles in Nadia District?

1.5. The Objectives of the Study

O1: To understand how educated women interpret the meaning of education in shaping their family roles and self-identity.

O2: To examine women's perceptions of changing family norms across generations.

O3: To know the quality of familial support received by the educated women in context of changed role of family of Nadia district.

2. The Review of Related Literature

Mandal, R., Khatun, N., & Mete, J. (2024). This article reviewed governmental and state initiatives aimed at empowering women through education in India, West Bengal. The authors discussed policies, scholarship schemes, and support programs designed. The study emphasizes to promote gender equity, and enhance women's participation in education and broader public life within regional contexts.

Joshi, S., & Shivani. (2024). This study critically examined the socio-cultural and institutional barriers that limit women's educational participation in India. Integrating feminist and sociological frameworks, the authors identified traditional gender norms, discriminatory practices, infrastructural deficits, and safety concerns as major obstacles. The research emphasizes how deeply embedded societal expectations shape women's educational pathways, affecting both access and quality, particularly in rural and conservative settings.

2.1. The Research Gap

A review of recent studies reveals that while substantial research has examined women's educational mobility work-family role strain among earning mothers, intergenerational norms related to education and marriage policy initiatives in West Bengal, and structural barriers to women's education (Joshi & Shivani, 2024), educated women's own interpretations of education in shaping their family roles and self-identity. Existing literature largely focuses on access, outcomes, or macro-level norms, with insufficient qualitative exploration of how women perceive changing family norms across generations and evaluate the quality of familial support in their everyday lives. Moreover lack of region-specific, micro-level studies focusing on Nadia District that integrate women's subjective experiences with evolving family structures. The present study seeks to address this gap by exploring educated women's perceptions of education, family roles, and support systems within their specific socio-cultural context.

3. The Methodology of Study

The present study adopted a **qualitative research approach** to explore the perceptions of educated women regarding changing family roles and societal engagement in Nadia District. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and informal discussions, allowing participants to express their views on education, family norms, and the quality of familial support in depth. With recurring patterns and meanings identified to address the objectives of the study, ensuring credibility through careful interpretation and contextual validation.

4. The Analysis and Interpretation

O1: To understand how educated women interpret the meaning of education in shaping their family roles and self-identity.

Educated women's interpretations of the meaning of education in shaping family roles and self-identity reflect a multifaceted interplay between personal aspirations, cultural norms, and evolving social expectations. For many women, education is understood not merely as formal attainment of degrees but as a transformative force that enhances critical thinking, confidence, and self-efficacy, enabling them to redefine traditional family roles and assert greater agency within domestic spaces. In this regard, education becomes a lens through which women reconstruct their self-identity, moving beyond prescribed roles of caregiving to embrace wider aspirations for personal development and social participation.

However, this interpretation is shaped by the socio-cultural context in which these women live. In semi-urban and rural regions such as Nadia District, prevailing patriarchal norms continue to privilege traditional family roles, higher education. Research indicates that while education expands women's horizons, it does not automatically undo deeply entrenched gender expectations; instead, many women negotiate a hybrid identity where they strive to balance educational aspirations with familial duties (Kabeer, 2005). Women in such contexts often articulate education as both an empowerment tool and a source of tension, as it raises personal ambitions that may conflict with conventional household obligations.

Furthermore, education's influence on self-identity is mediated by the type and quality of familial support available. Women who report stronger emotional and instrumental support from family members—especially from mothers or female relatives who serve as role models—tend to interpret education as a liberating force that validates their capabilities both within and beyond the home. Educated women in Nadia District interpret the meaning of education as a dynamic and negotiated construct that influences their family roles and self-identity in contextually specific ways. While education enhances self-confidence and provides cognitive and communicative resources for renegotiating traditional roles, its ultimate impact is contingent upon social norms, family support systems, and the broader structural environment. These interpretations highlight the importance of understanding education not merely as a quantitative achievement but cultural expectations and gender relations.

O2: To examine women's perceptions of changing family norms across generations.

Educated women's perceptions of changing family norms across generations reflect a nuanced intergenerational expectations, cultural practices, and socio-economic shifts shape women within the household. Many women report that traditional norms upheld by older generations—such as prioritizing marriage and caregiving over education or employment—have been gradually challenged

by contemporary values that emphasize the importance of women's schooling and economic participation. Educated women in Nadia often compare their experiences with those of their mothers or older relatives, noting that earlier generations were more constrained by expectations of subservience and domestic confinement.

The reasons behind these perceived changes are rooted in both structural transformations and individual agency. For example, women point to improved access to education, exposure to diverse role models, and participation in community initiatives as catalysts for reimagining family roles. In Nadia District, this has translated into narratives where educated women feel that their families increasingly value their opinions, involve them in decision-making, and support aspirations that diverge from traditional paths. Such generational shifts are evident in personal testimonies where younger women articulate expectations of equal partnership in relationships and shared household responsibilities, contrasting sharply with the experiences of their mothers, who often subsumed their aspirations under family duties.

However, perceptions of changing norms are not uniform and are deeply mediated by socio-cultural contexts. Educated women from more conservative or economically disadvantaged households report that, despite broader shifts, the lived reality within their families still reflects rigid gender expectations. In these settings, educational attainment may be accepted but accompanied by persistent pressure to conform to caregiving roles, reinforcing a dual burden rather than a redefinition of roles. Research in similar Indian contexts has found that socio-economic status, caste norms, and rural residence can temper the extent to which family attitudes evolve, with some households maintaining traditional expectations even as they invest in daughters' education (Joshi & Shivani, 2024). Educated women often navigate interplay of acceptance and resistance, where they recognize generational changes in abstract terms but encounter selective adaptation of norms in everyday life.

This generational lens highlights both progress and persistence within family structures. Educated women's perceptions reveal optimism about the direction of change—especially regarding increased respect for women's aspirations and contributions—yet also underscore enduring constraints that slow the pace of normative transformation. The evidence suggests that while younger women may articulate a vision of gender equity in family roles, achieving substantive change requires not only individual education but also sustained shifts in family attitudes, community practices, and institutional support systems that reinforce equitable norms across generations.

O3: To know the quality of familial support received by the educated women in context of changed role of family of Nadia district.

The **quality of familial support** encompasses emotional encouragement, practical assistance, and attitudinal acceptance that enable educated women to balance evolving roles within the family and society. Educated women frequently describe familial support as a critical factor that shapes how they internalize education and negotiate responsibilities. For many participants, emotional support—such as encouragement to pursue further studies, approval of career ambitions, and affirmation of decision-making capacity—serves as a foundation for developing self-confidence and agency. In Nadia District, this form of familial backing was often linked to higher self-efficacy among women, as families who valued education tended to broaden their expectations of women's contributions beyond domestic spheres.

However, the nature of support is not uniform across all households. Some educated women report **conditional or limited support**, where families favor educational attainment primarily for enhancing marriage prospects or improving domestic management skills, rather than for facilitating autonomous social engagement. This echoes findings from studies which show that institutional encouragement may coexist with selective familial endorsement, reinforcing traditional gendered roles even as educational levels rise (Joshi & Shivani, 2024). In such contexts, support tends to be instrumental but constrained—families may assist with logistics like paying tuition or arranging transport, yet still expect women to prioritize caregiving responsibilities over personal ambitions. Consequently, women in these households often experience a tension between valuing education for its personal and intellectual benefits and feeling obliged to fulfil normative domestic roles.

The **quality of support** also varies with socio-economic and demographic factors. Educated women from more affluent or urbanized families typically receive broader and more empowering forms of support, including encouragement to pursue employment, leadership roles, or further study. Conversely, women from rural or economically constrained backgrounds frequently encounter restrictive support that emphasizes traditional roles, such as caregiving or household management, even when educational attainment is high. These women often have to navigate competing expectations, articulating appreciation for familial care while also critiquing limitations that narrow the practical value of their education.

Importantly, many women articulate that **emotional support and recognition of their aspirations** are as significant as material resources. Narratives from Nadia District illuminate how families that listen, validate, and integrate women's voices into household decision-making contribute to positive self-concept and broader engagement in societal arenas. This quality of support transforms education from a purely academic achievement into a lived resource for empowerment. The familial support in

the district plays a decisive role in shaping how educated women experience their changed roles—not just as learners but as active agents within their families and communities.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that educated women in Nadia District perceive education as a transformative force that shapes their self-identity, enhances confidence, and enables them to renegotiate traditional family roles, although its impact is often mediated by prevailing social expectations. Women's perceptions of changing family norms across generations reveal a gradual shift from rigid patriarchal values toward greater acceptance of women's education and participation in decision-making, yet traditional expectations related to caregiving and domestic responsibility continue to persist. The quality of familial support emerges as a critical determinant in this process, with emotional encouragement, shared responsibility, and recognition of women's aspirations significantly strengthening their ability to balance family roles and societal engagement. Overall, while education has expanded women's awareness and agency, the study highlights that meaningful change depends not only on individual educational attainment but also on supportive family environments and evolving intergenerational attitudes within the socio-cultural context of Nadia District.

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