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## Socio-Cultural Accessibility and Social Capital leading to Women Empowerment in Higher Education: A study of University of Lucknow

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### Abstract

Women empowerment became a much sought-after topic for researchers of various disciplines in recent years. Since then, various attempts have been made to measure it. In due course of time, few scales and dimensions came up. The present paper focuses on the socio-cultural dimension used to measure women empowerment. This dimension covers certain sub domains like marriage system, norms regarding women's physical mobility, non-familial social support system and networks available to women.

Higher education has been considered the greatest tool of development and women empowerment. Higher education not only makes an individual capable enough to be employed but also increases their socio-cultural accessibility leading to the development of their social-capital which has become critical in present times as far as empowerment is concerned. Thus, the study of women empowerment across socio-cultural dimension within the institution of higher education provides a great understanding of the current status of women in terms of empowerment.

**Keywords:** women empowerment, higher education, social capital, socio-cultural accessibility

**Subject classification:** Sociology

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## 1. Introduction

Higher education serves as an important tool for development of any nation. Mohanty (1983) argues that institutions of higher education like universities and colleges play a crucial role in the welfare of its people. In the pre-independence period, it was believed that higher education in true sense would work to develop a deeper and wide outlook towards life in totality. However, in post-independence period university education was reconstructed in a manner to meet the requirements to cater to the socio-economic development of the country. The Education Commission mentioned promotion of equality and social justice and to reduce social and cultural differences through diffusion of education as one of its main objectives (ibid, 100). In 1986, as per National Policy of Education (NPE), it was observed that the ultimate aim of higher education was considered to increase the coverage and improved quality of education which can help an individual irrespective of its background (caste, region, religion, class) to develop its potential to the fullest (ibid, 103). To achieve such equality, equal opportunity is required for accessibility along with conditions of success. The review of NPE in 1986, further suggested that the institution of higher education should have the courses and programs to facilitate and guide people's initiatives. Also, Nath (1984) argues that University holds an interaction with the community. On one hand it passes on the cultural heritage and on the other hand, it also creates a new social order. So, these institutions become part and parcel of the society.

The University Grants Commission suggested that University must take up extension as the third responsibility and it should be given the status of research and training. The co-curricular activities and community centered services are crucial for the wholistic development of students' personalities. The educational institution is considered a social organization and thus have responsibility of developing the communities (Mohanty, ibid, p.359-362).

Gender equality and women empowerment are one of the factors of Million Development Goals, achievement of which is considered crucial for sustainable development of the nation. (UNESCAP). Patel (1998) explaining women empowerment argues that women empowerment involves changing the power relations which compromises their position within the family and society. He further defines women empowerment as 'an enabling process' which helps in re-distribution of power amongst different genders. During this process, we can witness resistance, conflict and accommodation. Patel (ibid) discusses how education is an

important component for women empowerment. Higher education thus becomes instrumental in achieving gender equality. Its impact can be directly seen in terms of women empowerment of females who pursue it.

Socio-cultural dimension is one of the important dimensions across which women empowerment is measured. It has to be analysed across the sub domains like type of marriage system, physical mobility, non-familial social support systems and networks available to women (Malhotra et al, 2002). Freedom in physical mobility means how much a female can independently move outside the domestic realm for various purposes. Physical mobility of females also helps in social networking (Haque et al, 2011).

Social capital can be understood as the trust that an individual develops in social relations (Fukuyama, 1995). It is also described as civic interaction generated through involvement in voluntary associations (Putnam, 1995). Social capital is produced consciously by individuals who are in voluntary association with each other through some network of social relationship (Lake and Huckfeldt, 1998). Thus, it is developed through structured pattern of social interaction.

Owing to the patriarchal structure of our Indian society, the females have limited socio-cultural accessibility vis-a-vis males. They have known mostly familial social networks. Women empowerment also helps females in building the social capital by virtue of being an individual and not merely due to their identity as daughters, sisters or wife of someone.

The University of Lucknow is amongst the leading educational institutions of India. It is a public state university. It was founded in 1867 and thus is one of the oldest government owned institutions of higher education in India. It is a university committed to provide quality teaching, research and innovation rooted in the Indian Value system with considerable female enrolment. This makes it an apt field to study the empowerment across the socio-cultural dimensions.

## **2. Objectives of the study**

To be able to study the response of the respondents from their vantage point, the study of their socio-economic background with respect to variables like age, religion, caste, class etc.

becomes crucial. It facilitates the study by analysing the overall status of the respondent within society, which is of utmost importance while conducting a sociological study.

Women empowerment has been measured across different dimensions. In the present study, the socio-cultural dimension suggested in a background paper prepared for World Bank Page | 4 Workshop has been used. The paper also suggested sub-domains like marriage systems, norms regarding physical mobility, non-familial social support systems and network available to women under the socio-cultural dimension (Malhotra et al, 2002). Socio-cultural accessibility has been operationalized for the present study as the degree to which a female student, enrolled in higher education can freely move in physical space outside their domestic domain and have interactions within this space by the virtue of being enrolled in higher education.

The present study thus has two objectives-

1. To study the socio-economic background of women pursuing Higher Education in the University of Lucknow.
2. To analyse the socio-cultural accessibility of women pursuing higher education in the University of Lucknow.

### **3. Methodology**

The present study is primary data based in which non-probability sampling has been used, the sample size is 100 female students enrolled in an academic course of the University of Lucknow. Survey method has been used to conduct the study.

Structured interview schedule was prepared to collect the required data for generating socio-economic profile and to analyse the socio-cultural dimension across the sub domains of the marriage system, physical mobility, non-familial support and other networks at three arenas - household, community and broader.

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#### 4. Theoretical Perspective

The women centric feminist theory which attempts to present ideas from women's perspective follow three ways. Firstly, woman is the primary objective of study. Secondly, woman is the central subject which guides its subjectivity. Thirdly, the feminist theory is critical and works as activist for women (Lengermann and Neibragge-Brantley, 1988). Page | 5

Feminist research primarily seeks to ask 4 questions-

1. And what about the women?
2. Why is women's situation as it is?
3. How can we change and improve the social world?
4. What about differences among women?

Various school of feminism have different perspective centring around these basic ideas. Liberal feminism discusses how society structurally favours men to the disadvantage of women in the competition for power, money and prestige. Thus, Liberal Feminism wants to free women from oppressive gender roles, which are justified owing to the belief in their traditional feminine personality (Tong, 2009). Liberal Feminism out of all other perspectives can very well explain the status of women in India. It aims to bring women at par with men though facilitating access to public realms and demanding protection of their rights by state (Kachuk,1995).

#### 5. Analysis

##### 1. Socio-economic Profile

After the analysis of the various variables to assess the social-economic profile, it was found that 39% of the respondents belonged to the age group of 15-20 years. The percentage kept decreasing with increase in the age group. Only 1 respondent was found in the age group of 36-40 years. This clearly indicates the fall in number of students in consecutive higher courses (Table 1.01).

**Table 1.01: Age wise distribution of respondents**

Age Group	Number of respondents	Percentage
15-20	39	39%
21-25	31	31%
26-30	23	23%
31-35	06	6%
36-40	01	1%
<b>Total</b>	100	100%

Respondents were found to belong to Hindu (88%) and Muslim (12%) religions only. 35% belonged to General, 51% to OBC and 14% to SC. Brahmin, Yadav and Chamar, the sub castes, were highest in number in General, OBC and SC categories respectively. 88% of the respondents were found to be urban inhabitants while rest 12% belonged to rural areas.

Respondents were enrolled in Post Doc. (4%), PhD (32%), M.Phil. (4%), M.Sc. (10%), M.Com. (5%), M.A.(16%), B.Sc. (12%), B.Com. (5%), B.A. (12%) (Table 1.02).

**Table 1.02: Distribution of respondents as per their enrolment in academic course**

Name of the academic course	Number of respondents	Percentage
Post Doctorate	04	4%
Ph.D.	32	32%
M.Phil.	04	4%
M.Sc.	10	10%
M.Com.	05	5%
M.A.	16	16%
B.Sc.	12	12%
B.Com.	05	5%
B.A.	12	12%
<b>Total</b>	100	100%

Amongst all respondents, 73% had English, 26% had Hindi and 1% had Sanskrit as their medium of study (Table 1.03).

**Table 1.03: Distribution of respondents as per their medium (language) of study**

Medium of study (language)	Number of respondents	Percentage
Sanskrit	01	1%
Hindi	26	26%
English	73	73%
<b>Total</b>	100	100%

79% of the respondents had secured first division in the last exam they appeared in. 70% of the respondents were cohabiting with their parents, 16% stayed in hostels, 11% stayed in rented houses, 2% with their locally settled relatives and only 1% stayed in independent houses (Table 1.04).

**Table 1.04: Type of accommodation the respondents had**

Type of accommodation	Number of respondents	Percentage
Parent's residence	70	70%
Hostel	16	16%
Rented	11	11%
Independent House	01	1%
Relative's residence	02	2%
<b>Total</b>	100	100%

The course fees of the 50% of the respondents were funded by their parents. 22 % of them received scholarships and 21% were fellowship holders. 5% of them did part-time jobs and only 1 % used previously saved money for paying their fees (Table 1.05).

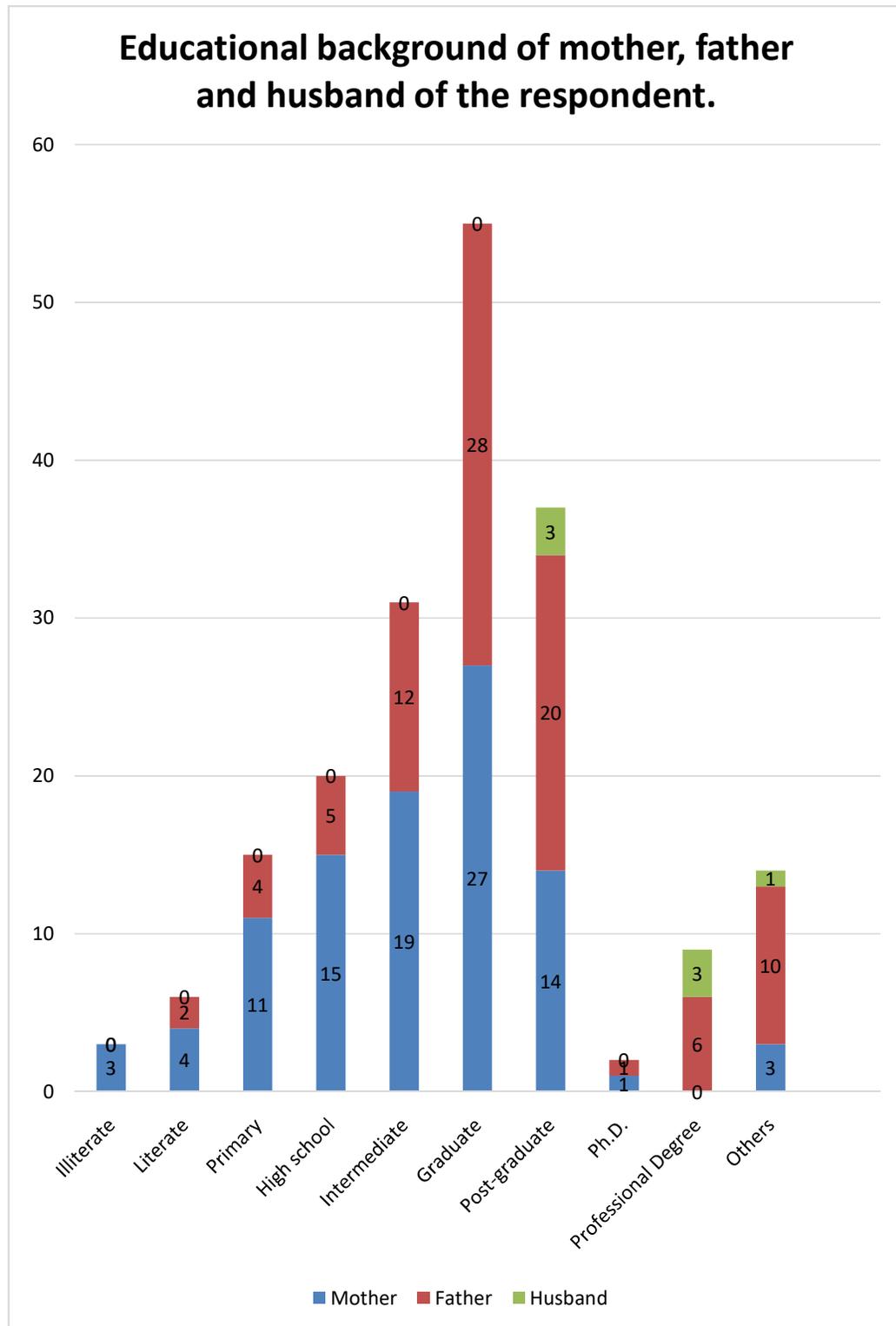
**Table 1.05: Description of source of fees for respondent's current academic course**

Source of fees	Number of respondents	Percentage
Parents	50	50%
Scholarship	22	22%
Fellowship	21	21%
Part-time job	05	5%
Savings from before	02	2%
<b>Total</b>	100	100%

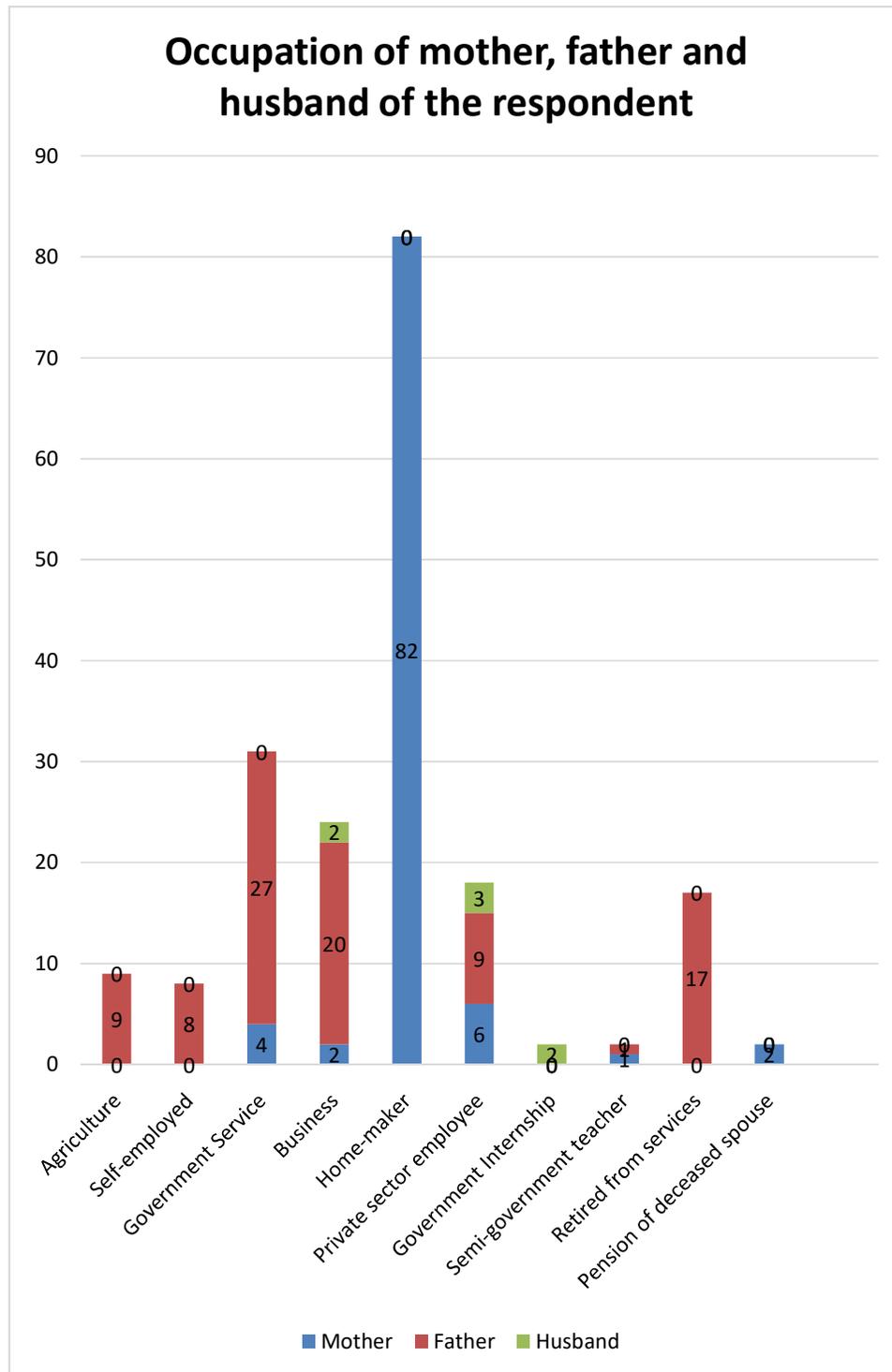
90% respondents were unmarried, 9 % married and 1 % divorced. Out of all the married respondents, only one respondents' husband funded her fees while 4 married females were dependent on their parents for funding their course fees.

The parents of the respondents were mostly found educated. Only 5 cases where mother was illiterate and 2 cases where father was illiterate were found. The husbands of married respondents were found to hold a higher degree or a professional degree (Fig. 1.3).

82% mothers of the respondents were homemakers and those mothers who were working were mostly teachers. 27% fathers of respondents were doing government service, 20% business, 9% agriculture, 8% self-employed and 17% retired from services. The husbands of the married respondents were businessmen, private sector employees or were undergoing medical internship (Fig. 1.4). Most of the respondents' annual family income was between 3-6 lakhs.

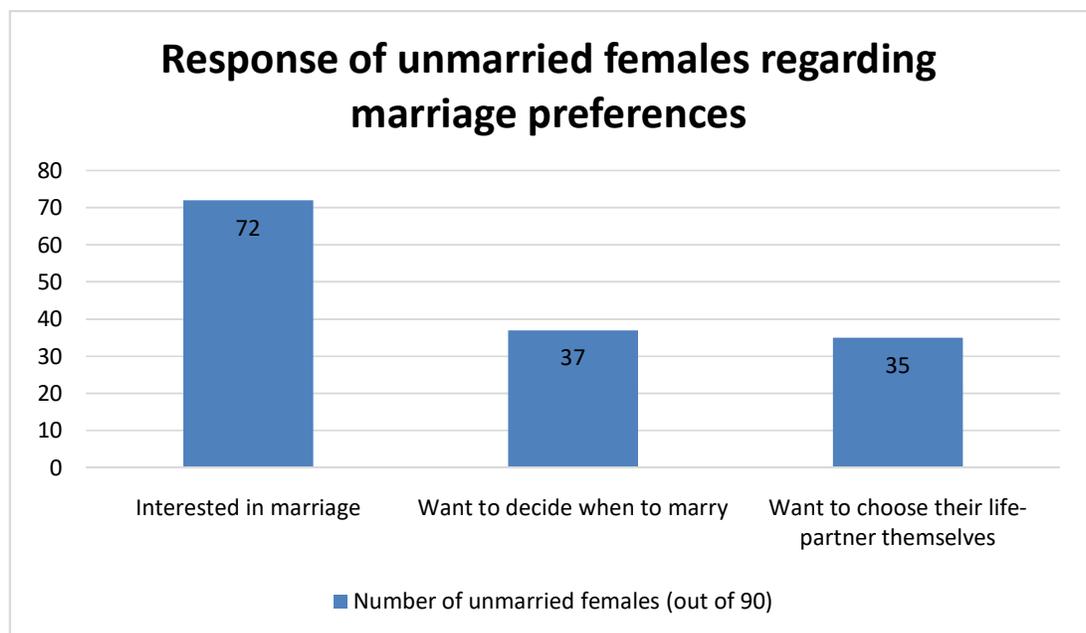


**Figure 1.3:** Graphical presentation of educational background of mother, father and husband of the respondent

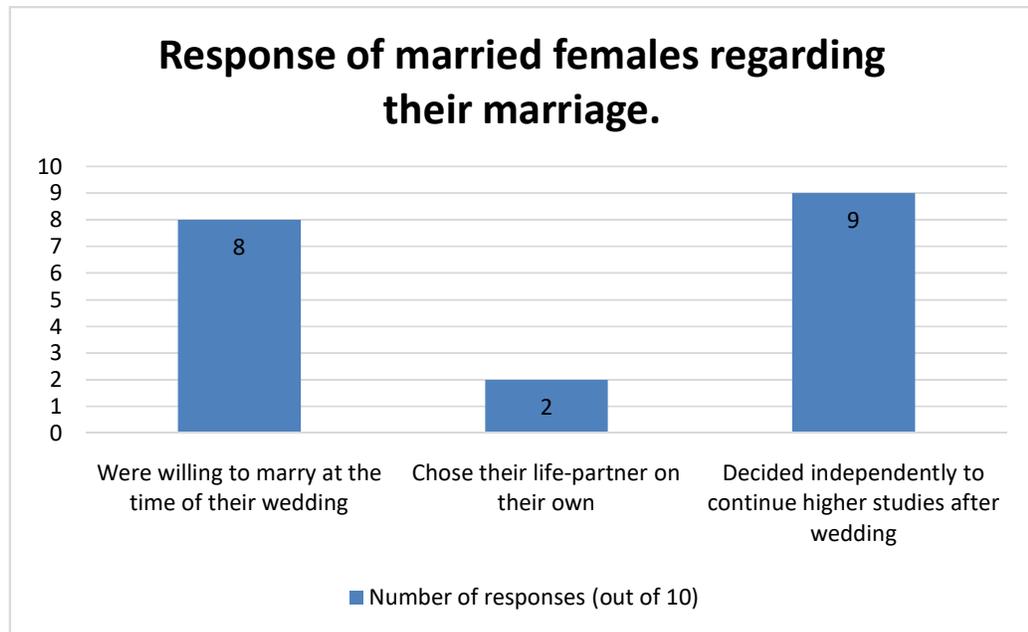


**Figure 1.4:** Graphical presentation of occupation of mother, father and husband of the respondent

80% of the unmarried respondents were interested in marrying though they give priority to their career and are supported for the same by their family. As far as the decision on choice of partner is concerned, 61 % of the respondents wanted to marry their parent's choice. Even when they wish to marry of their own choice, they want their parent's consent for that relationship (Fig. 1.1). 8 of 10 married respondents were willing to marry at the time of their marriage. 8 of 10 married respondents married to the partner chosen by their parents. 9 of 10 married respondents decided to study after their wedding and their decision was supported by their family (Fig. 1.2).



**Figure 1.1:** Graphical presentation of response of unmarried females regarding marriage preferences



**Figure 1.2:** Graphical presentation of response of married females regarding their marriage

## 2. Socio-cultural Accessibility

While analysing socio-cultural accessibility, it was found that 88% of the respondents were able to attend their classes regularly and did not face any issues in their physical mobility (Table 2.01).

**Table 2.01: Distribution of respondents as per their attendance in classes**

Frequency of attending classes	Number of respondents	Percentage
Daily	88	88%
Alternate days	06	6%
Twice a week	03	3%
Once a week	02	2%
Occasionally	01	1%
<b>Total</b>	100	100%

The most common reason for not coming to university was found to be ill-health. Interestingly, the second most common reason was for providing support at home.

Only 8% respondents reported issues in commuting to the university as the reason for not attending the classes regularly (Table 2.02).

**Table 2.02: Representation of the most common reason for not being able to attend the classes by respondents**

<b>Most common reason for not attending the class</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Problem in commuting to the university	08	8%
Objection of parents	04	4%
Financial constraints	04	4%
Classes are not held regularly	03	3%
Health challenges	43	43%
Familial obligations	11	11%
Doing self-study	06	6%
Personal inconvenience	04	4%
Peer pressure	01	1%
Not interested	16	16%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100%</b>

87% of the respondents commute alone to the university (Table 2.03). 56% of the respondents use public vehicles (Table 2.04). Among all those respondents who own the vehicle, only 9% purchased the vehicle on her own (Table 2.05).

**Table 2.03: Representation of the person (relation with respect to respondent) accompanying the respondent during their commute to the university**

<b>Person accompanying (Relationship with respondent)</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Self	87	87%
Parent	01	1%
Sibling	06	6%
Friend	04	4%
Husband	02	2%
<b>Total</b>	100	100%

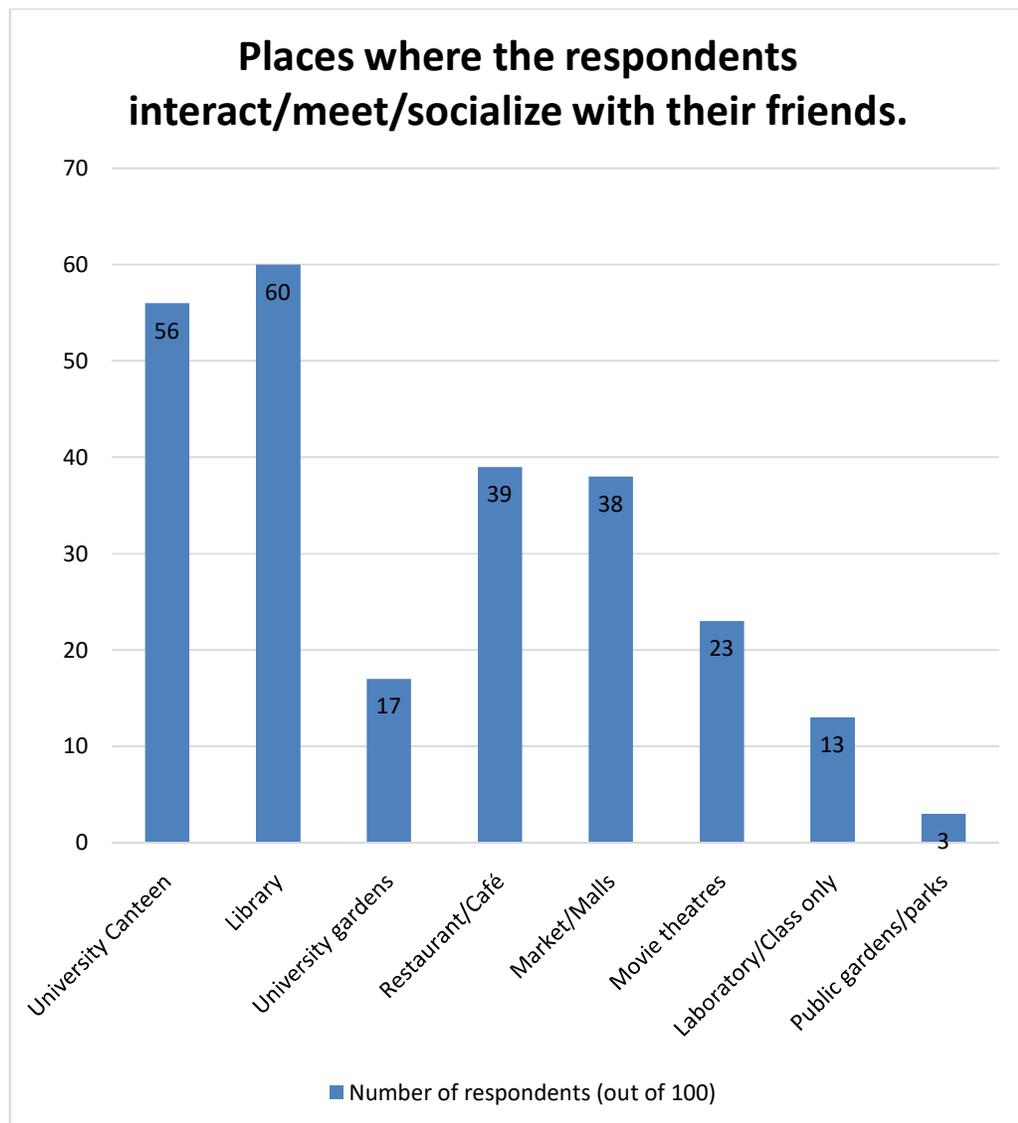
**Table 2.04: Representation of the most common mode of transport by the respondent for commuting to the university**

<b>Mode of transport</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Public	56	56%
Private-owned	12	12%
Private-shared	05	5%
Private- owned by family	11	11%
On foot	16	16%
<b>Total</b>	100	100%

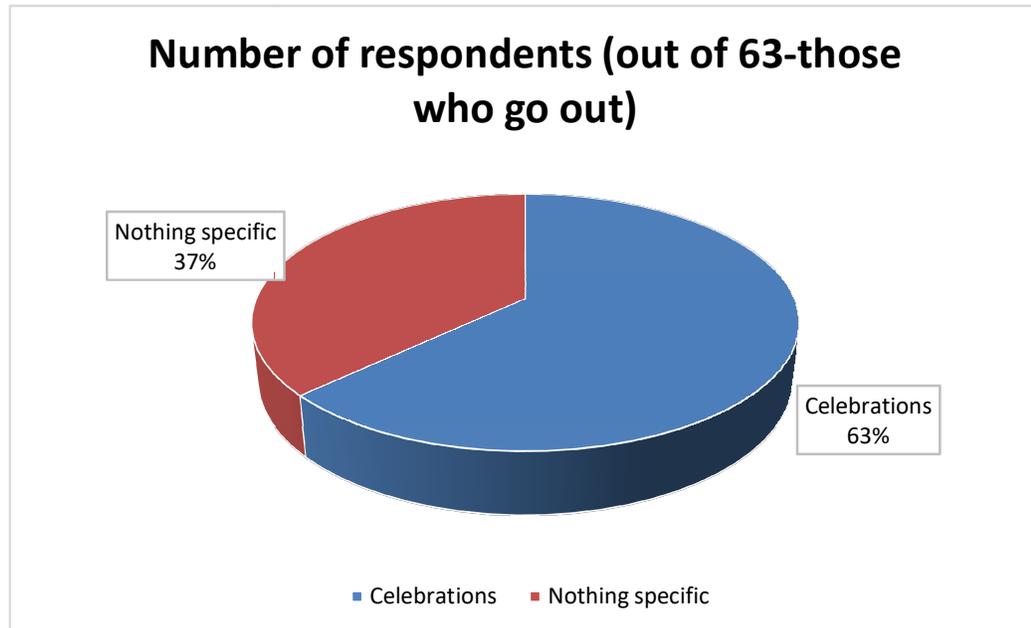
**Table 2.05: Representation of the source of ownership of the private vehicle of the respondent**

<b>Source of purchase of the private vehicle</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Purchased - self	01	9%
Gifted by parents	11	91%
<b>Total</b>	12	100%

41% of the respondents had friends only in their department while the rest 59% had friends in other departments as well. 13% of the respondents were able to interact with their friends only in their class or laboratory while 24% of the respondents visited university canteen and library with friends. 63% of the respondents socialized with their friends outside the campus at places like restaurants, cafes, malls, markets and go to movie theatres (Fig. 2.1). Amongst those who could meet outside the campus, 38% met occasionally, mostly to celebrate birthdays of friends (Fig. 2.2). Only 3% met frequently (Table 2.06).



**Figure 2.1:** Graphical presentation of places where the respondents interact/meet/socialize with their friends



**Figure 2.2:** Graphical presentation of response of most common purpose of meeting/get-together with friends outside the university campus

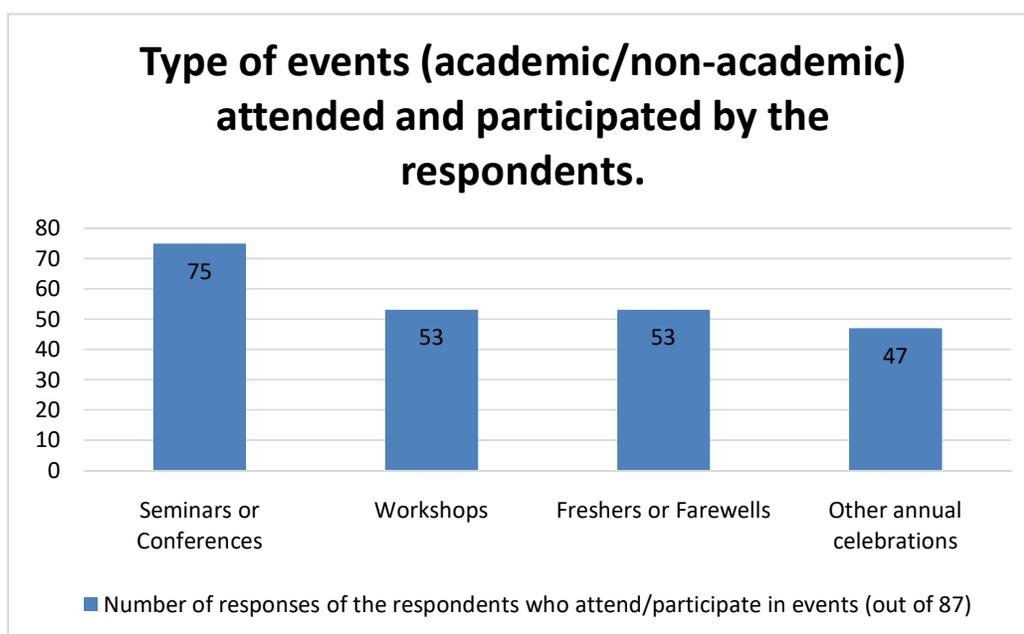
**Table 2.06: Representation of the frequency of casual meetings of respondents (those who go out) with friends outside the university campus**

Frequency of casual meetings	Number of responses	Percentage
Occasionally	38	60%
Once a month	16	25%
Twice a month	06	9%
Frequently	03	4%
Savings from before	02	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>100%</b>

64% of the respondents were willing to attend and participate in the academic/non-academic events (Table 2.07, Fig. 2.3).

**Table 2.07: Representation of nature of participation of respondents in academic/ non-academic events**

Nature of participation	Number of respondents	Percentage
Only attend	23	23%
Attend and participate	64	64%
Did not get opportunity till the time to attend or participate	13	13%
<b>Total</b>	100	100%

**Figure 2.3:** Graphical presentation of type of events (academic/non-academic) attended and participated by the respondents

42% were able to stay at the campus only till 5 PM for attending events while 37% were free to attend the event anytime (they were mostly research scholars) (Table 2.08). 49% of the respondents were able to attend events organized anywhere in the country (Table 2.09). These were mostly research scholars who participated in the academic events like conferences and seminars which aid in their research. These

research scholars mostly travelled with their lab mates or fellow research scholars (Table 2.11).

**Table 2.08: Representation of time limit till which respondents are able to attend the academic/non-academic events within the university**

<b>Time limit till which respondent could attend events</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1 PM	04	4%
5 PM	4	42%
8 PM	17	17%
Anytime	37	37%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 2.09: Representation of willingness attend the academic/non-academic events of the respondents depending upon the location of venue of the event**

<b>Location of event</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
University campus	18	18%
Lucknow (within city)	26	26%
Uttar Pradesh (within state)	07	7%
India (within country)	49	49%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 2.11: Representation of the person (relation with the respondent) accompanying the respondent (those who go outstation) to attend outstation academic/non-academic events**

<b>Person accompanying (Relationship with respondent)</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Self	03	5%

Parent	18	32%
Sibling	02	4%
Friend	06	11%
Husband	04	7%
Batchmates	22	39%
Faculty	01	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>100%</b>

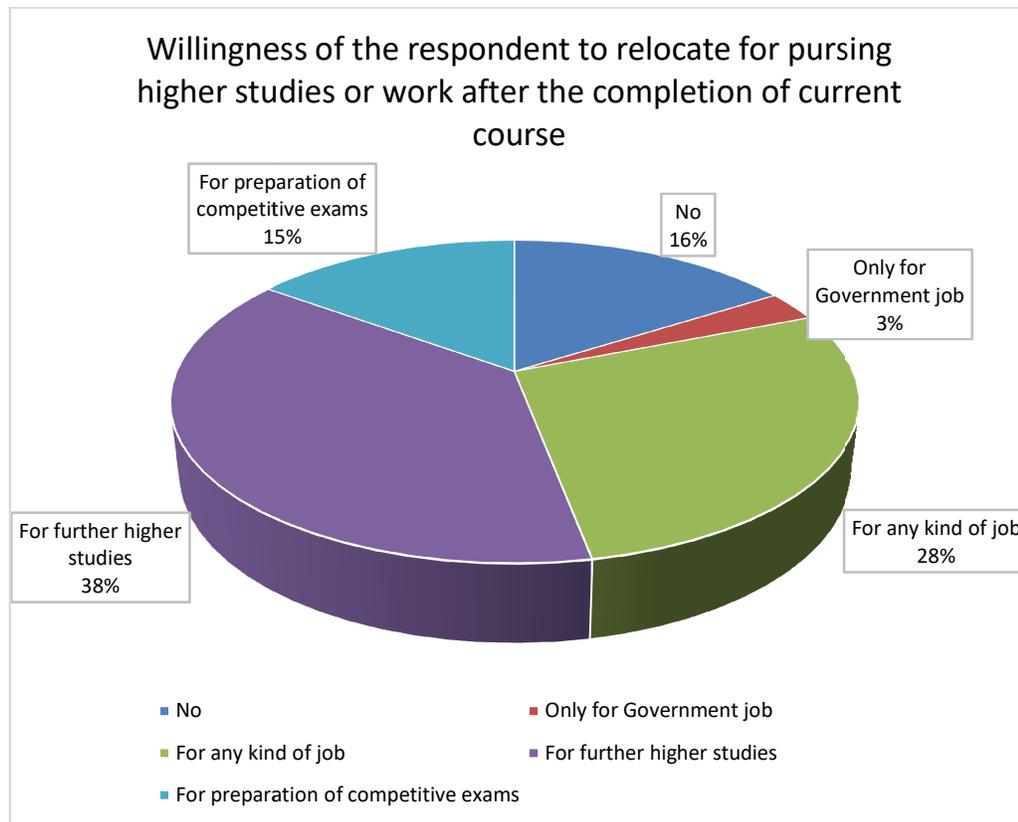
The most common reason reported for not being able to attend the outstation events or programs was the parent's objection (34%), Other common reasons were issues in commuting (9%), financial issues (8%), familial obligations (6%) (Table 2.10). Mostly the students expressed interest in attending and participating in the academic events as those were supported and appreciated by their parents and families.

**Table 2.10: Representation of the most common reason for not attending/participating in academic/non-academic events**

<b>Most common reason for not attending/ participating in the events</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Problem in commuting to the university	09	9%
Objection of parents	34	34%
Financial constraints	08	8%
Lack of awareness about events	03	3%
Safety concerns	02	2%
Familial obligations	06	6%
Health challenges	02	2%
Personal inconvenience	05	5%
Not interested	31	31%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100%</b>

60% of the respondents wanted to continue their study, 38% wanted to work and 2% wanted to marry after completing their present course of study. Respondents were

willing to relocate to a new place for further higher studies (38%), for preparation of competitive examinations (15%), for any kind of job (28%), for government jobs only (3%)(Fig. 2.4). 14% of the respondents were not willing to relocate.



**Figure 2.4:** Graphical presentation of willingness of the respondent to relocate for pursuing higher studies or work after the completion of current course

## 6. Conclusion

The socio-economic profile of female students under study revealed that the majority of females pursuing higher education hailed from the privileged section of society. They were urban, educated in English medium, had parents with good education and financial standing. Interestingly, the sample showed predominance of female students practicing Hinduism as religion and from OBC caste. The traditional trend of choosing humanities over commerce or science was reconfirmed in the study. A high percentage of students securing first division reflected the keen interest of the female students. However, economically these students were mostly found dependent on their parents for funding their academic course fees. Only few cases of financially independent female students were observed.

The prevalent patriarchal mindset supports the higher education of their females mostly to enhance the social status so as to get a good marital proposal. The same was found true in the study as the husbands of married female students were found well educated and economically strong. Further, with regard to marriage, responses of most females were found to be those confirming to the norms and values of their respective community and society in general. Most female students were willing to marry the partner chosen by their parents. Whereas those who wanted to choose their partner on their own wanted the consent of their parents. The strong hold of family as an institution is very evident here. Though a considerable number of female students were found to give priority to their higher education with the aim of building career and becoming financially independent. It has also resulted into marriage at a later age. Only few females were found to continue their higher studies after their wedding. Again, these female students belonged to the families with educated parents and husbands and received support from them.

As has been observed in the study, a considerable number of the female students enjoyed physical mobility. This ability to move freely was found to increase with number of years spent in higher education with successive degrees and courses. The daily commute to and from university lead to female students feeling more confident, so much so, few were able to purchase vehicle in their own names. Though the number is meagre, it's a remarkable growth in terms of increasing socio-cultural accessibility.

Even the social circle of these female students in the form of friends, colleagues, batchmates has developed as a result of their interactions made possible because of their enrolment in higher education. These interactions over time result into developing the social capital for these female students which will also empower them. The academic and non-academic events which are a part of higher education, helps further strengthening of their social capital. Also, it provides these female students the necessary exposure, resulting into both academic and personality growth.

Though the traditional expectations from females is to always prioritize household over individual engagements, which reflected in the study when many females stayed at home to support the family instead of attending classes or events in the university. Also, this was reconfirmed when the female students were not allowed to travel for various events if the parents thought there was no direct benefit in terms of education (which further could not be translated to economic gain through work). Even after completing their current course, most

female students wanted to relocate to another city only for a secured job and admission into prestigious intuitions for higher education. Majority preferred to stay in the same city where they belong to.

Towards the end it can be concluded that there are many constraints upon the female students which somewhere limit their opportunity of growth and empowerment. But it can't be denied that the female students enrolled in higher education have clear advantage over those who couldn't. It is because of their enrolment in higher education, they have been able to develop their own social capital moving outside those formed due to familial relations. Higher education indeed facilitates increasing the socio-cultural accessibility of female students by increasing their physical mobility, instilling greater confidence, developing a sense of decision-making for future whether for study, marriage or work. Page | 22

There are numerous arguments still to compare the pace at which women are being or not being empowered through Higher education, but as far as socio-cultural accessibility is concerned, higher education has significant contribution. This ultimately results into opening of many avenues for women empowerment.

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