

The role of higher education in providing opportunities for South Asian women

Increasing participation in higher education is a key government goal and South Asian women have raised their involvement dramatically during the last ten years. Yet there is considerable diversity between South Asian ethnic groups in the numbers of women going to university. This research, by Paul Bagguley and Yasmin Hussain at the University of Leeds, examines barriers to higher education, individual and institutional strategies for higher education success and young South Asian women's experiences of going to university. The study interviewed women of Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani origin in sixth forms, universities and after graduation. It found that:

- Indian women's participation in higher education is already high and growing slowly, Pakistani women's is moderate but growing rapidly and Bangladeshi women's is low and growing rapidly.
- The majority of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women at university are from working-class backgrounds or have fathers who are long-term sick, disabled or retired.
- Although having a degree dramatically reduces Bangladeshi and Pakistani women's unemployment rates, they are much less likely than Indian or white women to obtain professional or managerial employment.
- The rapid growth in university education amongst Bangladeshi and Pakistani women is due to high job aspirations and strong parental support.
- 'Pioneer women', the first from their local communities to go to university in the 1990s, are important role models for Bangladeshi and Pakistani women applying to university.
- Young Bangladeshi and Pakistani women often attend local universities because their parents prefer them to live at home whilst studying.
- Women chose particular universities because of the courses they offered, lower A-level score requirements and the advice of relatives and friends.
- The study concludes that successful participation in higher education amongst South Asian women depends upon local provision of relevant degrees; overcoming assumptions that they are not serious about education; good links between universities and local communities; a critical mass of South Asian students; and effective implementation of equality and diversity policies.



Background

This project examined South Asian women's experiences of higher education (HE) and the continuing barriers they face getting to university and into the labour market after graduation. Interviews took place in Birmingham and Leeds, which both have 'Russell Group' universities as well as large 'new' universities.

Participation in higher education

It is important to recognise the diversity of South Asian women's experiences of HE in terms of their parents' origins – from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan – their social class origins and their families' educational backgrounds. This is most evident from the differences in HE participation between the three ethnic groups. Indian women's participation is high but growing moderately. Pakistani women's participation is moderate but growing rapidly. Bangladeshi women's participation is low but growing rapidly. Women in all three groups have increased their participation in HE more rapidly than white women since the early 1990s. Consequently, 53.9 per cent of young Indian women under 30 have degrees compared with 29.7 per cent of white women in the same age group. However, only 25.6 per cent of young Pakistani women have degrees and only 15.5 per cent of Bangladeshi women under 30 do so. South Asian women, especially Bangladeshi and Pakistani women, remain among the most excluded and lowest paid sections of the labour force.

Young Indian and Pakistani women are more likely to apply to and get to university than young white women, whilst young Bangladeshi women are less likely to do so. White women are more likely than white men to go to university, but the admissions and acceptance rates among young Indian men and women are very similar. However, there are significantly higher rates of application and admission to university degrees among young Bangladeshi and Pakistani men than among women from those groups.

Analysis of UCAS data shows that in terms of going to university, Bangladeshi women still experience an 'ethnic penalty', whilst both Bangladeshi and Pakistani women experience a 'gender penalty'.

Young white women who get to university are more likely to be from the 'middle classes' than those from any of the South Asian groups. High percentages of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women who go to university come from routine occupational backgrounds or their father's occupation is 'unknown' (many of whom may be economically inactive due to unemployment, ill health or retirement).

Generally speaking, for each socio-economic group, the acceptance rates for Indian women and white women

are higher than those for Pakistani women. Middle-class Bangladeshi and Pakistani women experience an 'ethnic penalty' when applying to university. They are less likely to be successful in securing a place than their middle-class Indian and white peers.

Bangladeshi and Pakistani women starting university in 2005 were more likely to have attended sixth form college than those of Indian or white background. Women of Indian or white background were more likely to have attended an independent school than those of Bangladeshi or Pakistani origin. This is significant because independent schools have better support for their pupils applying to university.

Factors shaping decisions about higher education

The following factors shape decisions about going to university:

- natural progression from school;
- economic reasons: job, salary, status;
- independence;
- parental wishes;
- wanting to become better mothers and members of their own communities;
- a desire for education and personal development;
- following role models; and
- delaying marriage.

Indian women often spoke of a natural progression into higher education that was assumed by both their parents and their schools. However, Bangladeshi and Pakistani women tended to have more complex sets of reasons for pursuing higher education. Whilst they were encouraged to consider university by their parents, it was often not assumed to be a 'natural progression' for them by their schools.

The recent growth in the numbers of South Asian women going to university means that many have been 'pioneers' – the first women within their families or even their local communities to go on to higher education. The Bangladeshi women graduates in particular often talked about such pioneers within their community, and remembered a time when young women in their community got married at 16.

Marriage was central to the plans of young women from all of the South Asian communities. For most of the Indian students, marriage planning was not such a current concern, but for many of the Bangladeshi and Pakistani women decisions around marriage and negotiations with their parents about this were central. A few had married before going to university. Others saw marriage as a risk that could disrupt their education at

any point. However most had deferred their marriage until they had completed their degrees.

Almost all of the non-Muslim Indian students currently at university appeared to have had the option of leaving home. These women did talk about the reservations of their families, in particular their parents, about them leaving home. However, these reservations were a more significant issue for the Muslim women of Indian, Bangladeshi or Pakistani background.

For the Muslim women, leaving home to study involved considerable negotiation with their parents. Those who did move away from the family home to study often faced considerable obstacles persuading their parents to agree. For these Muslim students the main reasons for studying at a local university were the preferences of parents and the views of the wider community. These concerns about morality, parental and community views and the family's *izzat* (honour) remain a powerful force among some communities.

There are five subject areas where South Asian female applicants disproportionately apply and gain acceptance more than white female applicants: medicine and dentistry, subjects allied to medicine, mathematical and computer sciences, law and business and administrative studies. This study found that families generally wanted their daughters to study 'traditional' professional subjects such as law, medicine and dentistry; subjects such as sociology, English and psychology were not seen as serious academic disciplines. The main concern was for their future employment prospects; parents wanted to ensure their child would be able to use their education to obtain work or for it to have value within the wider society. Likewise, parents and young women viewed A-levels as a better path to further education and a 'good job'. Consequently, few of them had or were studying for vocational qualifications.

Perceptions of universities and widening participation

Widening participation and careers service officers felt that there was a strong tendency for South Asian women to apply to 'former polytechnics' or 'new universities'. However there were two views about this issue. One perspective saw universities becoming ethnically marked as either largely for the white and middle-class or more welcoming to ethnic minority students. In contrast, others saw the issue in terms of the kinds of courses on offer and the grades required for entry. These were seen as being especially attractive to those who were in the first generation to go to university, such as many Bangladeshi and Pakistani women.

However, the young women interviewed saw differences between universities in terms of prestige. Those students currently at university placed huge significance on the prestige of a university in the vast majority of instances. They also acknowledged the differences in job prospects, as they perceived employers as being more interested in students who had attended 'old' universities. Despite this widespread knowledge of the varying prestige of institutions the researchers did not encounter anyone who had applied to Oxford or Cambridge, and none had even considered doing so. These universities were felt to be totally out of 'their league'. Overall, the 'new' universities seemed to be preferred due to the courses on offer, the A-level scores they required and the advice of family and friends.

Financing degrees

Direct financial support from parents and even the wider family was especially important for almost all of the current undergraduates. This may be creating new layers of obligation and dependence between parents and their offspring. There was little aversion to the necessity of using student loans, although some Muslim students had refused to take out loans for religious reasons. Some Sikh and Hindu students also avoided debt, based upon the negative experiences of older siblings and the advice of parents. Finally, despite the strong desire to pursue further qualifications, the self-financing of postgraduate qualifications was especially difficult. This last feature is likely to be a significant source of further educational inequality in the future as many more people graduate with first degrees.

Experiences of racism at university

For some of the women the issue of ethnic difference was raised for them by the reactions of white people they encountered at university, who had sometimes never personally known South Asian people before. Some of their fellow white students assumed that South Asian women do not drink and socialise in the same way as young white people. They had a stereotype of the 'typical Indian girl' as domesticated and compliant:

"They said 'wow, but you go out drinking, you're not typical' ... They had this image of a girl that stands in the kitchen."

(Davinder Kaur, Indian undergraduate, Leeds)

The women were very critical of some staff in schools who had shown a lack of interest in South Asian pupils. Many of the women interviewed had either encountered or heard about teachers who did not take the education of South Asian women seriously. This seemed to especially apply to Bangladeshi and Pakistani women and to working-class Indian (often Sikh) students. This minority of teachers assumed, often quite openly, that

South Asian women's education was going to be a waste of time as they were destined for marriage and motherhood rather than for careers.

At university the racism experienced by young South Asian women came from fellow students as well as staff. This was often in the form of unacknowledged assumptions about young South Asian women. These often revolved around what might be termed liberal stereotypes about oppressed South Asian women, especially Muslim women. Some felt that they were constantly correcting white liberal myths about South Asian Muslim women, that they felt were both racist and sexist in their failure to appreciate the change and diversity in South Asian communities.

The interviewing took place after the 11 September 2001 attacks in the USA, and some of the women had suffered from the backlash, in particular those wearing *hijab*. Others had a lot of questions asked of them at school or university after the attacks.

Assumptions about Islam and Muslims also crept into the teaching context in those subjects where issues around the relationship between Islam and 'the West' were encountered. Some mentioned quite explicit comments or actions from a few academic staff that questioned their academic ability.

"At school I just felt like some teachers didn't want to teach me because I was ... stereotyped as an Asian and [they] felt that we weren't interested in education and we didn't want to learn anything or we were a waste of time."

(Jasvinder Kaur, Sikh undergraduate, Leeds)

Conclusion

The study found that women from Bangladeshi and Pakistani backgrounds are rapidly increasing their participation in higher education. They will soon reach the high levels of participation currently found amongst

women from Indian backgrounds. However, there still remain a number of obstacles to their continued success in education and in their access to graduate level employment.

A number of policy and practice issues arise from the research that point to ways that these successes can be built upon. Access to courses locally that South Asian women want to study continues to be important. Furthermore, it is still necessary to overcome assumptions in communities, schools, universities and amongst employers that South Asian women from certain communities are not serious about higher education.

Universities need to maintain established widening participation links with local communities and related careers service work for female South Asian students and graduates. Some local South Asian communities need to recognise the value of a wider range of degree subjects that young women could be encouraged to apply for, and that may be more suitable to their talents. Developing role models and a 'critical mass' of students within universities is also important to enable students to feel comfortable and that their university belongs to them. Universities also need to ensure that equality and diversity policies are put into practice by successfully challenging unacceptable behaviour from staff and students.

About the project

The research team interviewed 114 young women in all, of whom 37 were Indian, 51 were Pakistani and 26 were Bangladeshi. Around a third of them were still in the sixth form (39), a third at university (43) and a third were recent graduates (32). In addition, official statistical sources such as the Census of Population, UCAS and HESA were also consulted. A small sample of widening participation and careers service staff in universities were also interviewed about policy and practice in relation to South Asian women.

For further information

The full report, **The role of higher education in providing opportunities for South Asian women**, by Paul Bagguley and Yasmin Hussain is published for the Foundation by the Policy Press (ISBN 978 1 86134 973 6, price £12.95).

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