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The Review of Higher Education, Volume 41, Number 1, Fall 2017, pp. 91-112
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2017.0034>



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The Review of Higher Education

Fall 2017, Volume 41, No. 1, pp. 91–112

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The Role of Women’s Colleges and Universities in Providing Access to Postsecondary Education

Kristen A. Renn

Abstract: Based on a qualitative, comparative, multiple case study of the contributions and status of 21st century women’s colleges and universities, this article analyzes the topic of women’s access to postsecondary education in ten nations. Despite decreasing numbers of women-only institutions in some regions (e.g., North America), the sector is growing in others (e.g., South Asia). In all regions, they provide access for women who would not be able to attend postsecondary education, a phenomenon mediated by cultural, religious, and economic factors. I describe three main mechanisms through which women’s institutions provide access: legal, practical (financial and academic), and cultural.

Keywords: postsecondary, tertiary, women, access

Kristen A. Renn is Professor of Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education at Michigan State University. Her research focuses on student development, learning, and success, with a particular focus on the experiences of students minoritized on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation. She is a graduate of Mount Holyoke College, one of the oldest women’s colleges in the world, and has an abiding intellectual interest in how women’s higher education shapes and is shaped by social contexts.

It is tempting to believe that in the 21st century, women's access to higher education is no longer a question, no longer a problem in need of resolution or even discussion. Beginning with female seminaries in the early 1800s in the United States, women have slowly gained access to the full range of postsecondary institutions, including the world's most elite former men's colleges and universities. Across the entire world, women can legally attend coeducational public or private institutions (Renn, 2014). Yet there are women worldwide for whom coeducational institutions are not accessible for reasons of tradition, culture, religion, or financial resources (Altbach 2004; Bradley & Saigol, 2012; Knight 2004; Renn, 2012, 2014; Sahni & Shankar 2012; Sperling & Winthrop, 2016). Just as they did 200 years ago, women's colleges and universities serve as access points to higher education for these students.

Providing access is only one role that women's institutions play in the 21st century. Others include promoting leadership development among students, creating welcoming campus climates for female students and faculty, and contributing to gender empowerment in local communities (Renn, 2012, 2014). Women's colleges and universities address the needs of women in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields (Aliya, Sherin, & Nagalakshmi, 2011; Chandralaka, 2011; Kodate, Kodate, & Kodate, 2010; Sridhara, 2011; Wolf-Wendel, 1998, 2000, 2002), provide opportunities for leadership development (Renn & Lytle, 2010), and promote deep academic and personal development for students (Hardwick-Day, 2008; Indiresan, 2011; Kinzie, Thomas, Palmer, Umbach, & Kuh, 2007; Nadeem, Mohsin, Ali, & Mohsin, 2012). Some scholars argue that women's institutions achieve these goals more effectively than evenly matched comparison groups of coeducational institutions (Kinzie et al., 2007; Kodate et al., 2010; Wolf-Wendel, 1998), while other scholars examined women's higher education as an independent sector to derive these findings (Aliya et al., 2011; Chandralaka, 2011; Indiresan, 2002, 2011; Kodate et al., 2010). In either argument, women's colleges and universities demonstrably contribute to learning and development for their students.

Benefits of women's education accrue not only to students and alumnae of women's institutions, but extend to societal benefits as well. Abundant evidence supports the claim that increasing girls' and women's education contributes to a host of desirable outcomes, including those related to health, human rights, civic participation, and economic measures (International Bank, 2011; Nussbaum, 2004; Sen 2004; Sperling & Winthrop, 2016; UNESCO, n.d.). In addition, women's education levels are positively related to child literacy, health, and school-going (International Bank, 2011; Sen, 2004; UNESCO, n.d.). As Nobel winning economist Amartya Sen (2004) said, "[women's education plays] a crucial role . . . in facilitating radical social and economic changes that are so badly needed in our problem-ridden world" (pp. 2-3).

Even given these ostensibly positive outcomes, opposition to educating girls and women remains a robust force. The attempted murder in 2012 of Malala Yousafazi, a teenage activist for girls' and women's education, the 2013 al-Qaeda attack on a bus carrying students of Pakistan's Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University, and the 2014 kidnapping by terrorist organization Boko Haram of 276 Nigerian schoolgirls are extreme examples of some commonly held cultural, religious, and political beliefs that girls and women do not belong in education. Families may choose not to send girls to elementary and secondary education, foreclosing any opportunities for advanced education (Sperling & Winthrop, 2016). Religiously conservative families may wish to keep their daughters separate from men at home, at school, and in the workplace (Kurshid, 2012). Even if they received an elementary education, young women may be kept at home to assist with farming or caring for young children (Radha, 2011; Stromquist, 2001). Poor families may choose to invest their resources in a son who will provide for them, rather than a daughter who will marry into another family and leave them (Malik & Courtney, 2011; Nussbaum, 2004; Radha, 2011; Sahni & Shankar, 2012). A woman's chance for higher education is thus circumscribed by tradition, culture, religion, and economic circumstances (Altbach, 2004; Bradley & Saigol, 2012; Renn, 2012, 2014; Stromquist, 2012). To be clear, a daughter's education may be important to many of these families, but other factors take precedence in making decisions about her opportunities and intersections of gender, social class, religion, and culture affect educational decision making. Indeed, poor girls from minoritized groups (race, ethnicity, religion, tribe, caste, or class) are the least likely in the world to attain an education (Sperling & Winthrop, 2016; Stromquist, 2001, 2005).

For some students and their families, single-sex¹ higher education, when made affordable, represents an acceptable solution. As they have around the world throughout the last 200 years, women's colleges and universities provide access to women who would not otherwise – for a host of cultural, religious, practical, and financial reasons – participate in higher education. During the 19th and 20th centuries, the single-sex postsecondary sector in North America, Europe, and East Asia emerged, expanded, and then gradually shrank as formerly all-male institutions admitted female students and all-female institutions merged with male or coeducational institutions or closed their doors in the face of decreasing interest among college applicants

¹Sex and gender are distinct concepts, the former being a biologically-based category and the latter being a social construction located in cultural and historical contexts. I use “single-sex” sparingly to identify institutions that are intended to be all female or all male in their student composition. Single-sex is the term educators and researchers commonly use to refer to K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions that are all-girls or all-women.

(see Biemiller, 2011; Wolf-Wendel, 2002). Providing access to higher education has historically been a central role of women's colleges and universities worldwide.

A small number of the original women's institutions, typically those most prestigious and well resourced, persist in the U.S., Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea (for a partial listing, see Purcell, Helms, & Rumbley, 2005). A handful of women's residential colleges persist within coeducational universities in the United Kingdom, Italy, Australia, and Canada. In the Middle East and South Asia, the sector remains robust. In India, the sector grew from 780 colleges in 1987 to 1195 in 1987 (Knight, 2004); there are currently over 2,500 (Radha, 2011), and in 2012, the University Grants Commission proposed adding 800 additional women's colleges and 20 women's universities, including the first national (public) women's university (*Times of India*, 2012). A handful of new public and private women's universities have opened or are in the planning stages in the Middle East, Africa, and South and Southeast Asia (see, for example, Ajbaili, 2011 for an account of a new women's university in Saudi Arabia). All of these institutions operate in contexts in which coeducation is legal and, in most, is the overwhelming norm. A question then arises: Where women have equal access to higher education, where women outnumber men in universities, or where coeducation is so prevalent that few women will consider a single-sex institution, what role if any do 21st century women's colleges and universities still play in providing access to higher education? In this article, I address this research question and analyze the role of women's colleges and universities in providing access to postsecondary education in each of these contexts.

RESEARCH APPROACH, DESIGN, AND METHODS

I drew from feminist standpoint, transnational feminist, and international/comparative educational research perspectives to design a study that could answer the broad question about the contributions of women's institutions to their national systems of education, the larger project on which this article is based. I held women and women's institutions at the center of the study, a feminist standpoint perspective described by Harding (1987). I also recognized that studying the diversity of women worldwide requires a transnational feminist perspective that avoids imposition of a Westernized view of feminism onto other contexts and compression of women's experiences into singular categories or monolithic constructions (see Harding, 1987; Mendez & Wolf, 2011; Mendoza, 2002; Stromquist, 2000).

These perspectives informed my research design. I decided, for example, to focus exclusively on institutions that educate women rather than include a comparison group of coeducational institutions. This focus is consistent with

feminist standpoint methodology (Harding, 1987) that illuminates gender as a central organizing power in societies around the world. In analysis and interpretation, I aimed to find commonalities within and across institutions without universalizing to what Stromquist (2000, p. 421) called some imagined "generic" woman." I thus attempted to maintain gender as an identifiable political category in local, national, and international contexts without essentializing women's experiences globally (Mendez & Wolf, 2011).

Consistent with tenets of feminist standpoint and transnational feminist perspectives, I focused on understanding women and women's institutions in social contexts. Shahjahan and Kezar (2013) argued against what they termed "methodological nationalism" and for a more global view of higher education systems of knowledge and power. While I agree substantially with their stance against reinscribing global systems of power through research located in national containers, I argue that it is equally important to recognize that national contexts of policy, practice, and culture circumscribe and constrain women's educational opportunities. Furthermore, Stromquist (2005) called on researchers to conduct international comparative studies of gender and education, and I designed my study to contribute to comparative literature on women in postsecondary education.

A vertical case study approach to comparative research (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006) is consistent with feminist standpoint and transnational feminist perspectives on situating specific experiences within larger systems of power. In order to study the roles of women's higher education institutions using "contextual understanding and detailed micro-level research" (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006, p. 96) I undertook a comparative, multi-site vertical case study design. In the case of women's colleges and universities, vertical case study demonstrates "concomitant commitment to micro-level understanding and macro-level analysis" (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006, p. 96) through attention to how national and international forces shape historical and contemporary institutional and local circumstances. This attention to context and power relations is consistent with transnational feminist approaches. The two primary strategies I used for data collection were: 1) obtaining documents and records on national higher education systems and individual institutions; and 2) site visits during which I interviewed campus leaders, faculty, students, and, when possible, Ministry of Education staff.

Selection of research sites

I followed principles of maximum variation sampling in qualitative research (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013) and Vavrus and Bartlett's (2006) recommendations regarding international comparative studies to select research sites. Based on the literature on gender, education, and development, the four main criteria I used in selecting institutions were: 1) supranational region (e.g., Indian subcontinent, Middle East); 2) institutional history and

mission (e.g., adult education, liberal arts, STEM); 3) institutional control and governance (i.e., its relationship to the state as government sponsored, private, or religiously affiliated); and 4) institutional type (e.g., free-standing institution, college affiliated with a coeducational university, residential college within a university). There were some regions where women's institutions exist that I excluded from the study for reasons related to safety, civil unrest, and war during the time of my data collection. I purposefully selected 13 institutions in ten nations (Australia, Canada, China, India, Italy, Japan, Kenya, South Korea, UAE, UK) for the ways they represent types and status of women's colleges and universities globally.

Data collection and analysis

From February 2009 to June 2011, I conducted site visits of an average of one week per institution. Data for each site includes documents and websites, interviews, student focus groups, and on-site observations. Before visiting the campus, I created a data set related to the national context of higher education (e.g., history and governance of entire education system, percentage of adults with college degrees, percentage of women with college degrees, costs of and funding for higher education) and as specific as possible about the institution (e.g., founding, governance, curriculum, costs, composition of student body). I used a key informant at each location, some identified through *Women's Education Worldwide*, others through referral from colleagues, to help set up interviews. On site I interviewed presidents (also called rectors, chancellors, principals, or vice-chancellors), academic leaders (deans, department chairs), faculty across departments, and staff (e.g., student welfare, registrar, chaplain, admissions). I conducted focus groups with students and, in a few cases, alumnae. Informants typically assembled students from academic classes or student organizations. I used an open-ended protocol for all interviews and focus groups, asking questions about individuals' experiences at their institution, experiences (for faculty and staff) of co-educational institutions, and perceptions of the value of single-gender higher education in their country. Germane to this analysis, I always asked students how they chose their institution and how its gender composition factored into their decision to attend, as well as what they would have done if a women's institution was not available to them.

At each site, I conducted informal observations of campus life in such venues as libraries, dining halls, cafes, faculty lounges, student centers, sport fields, and cultural activities. I accepted invitations to participate in campus events and activities including an alumna book signing, a Take Back the Night march, a sports field day, a campus festival, a student research exposition, a student fashion show, and a student entrepreneurs showcase. My observations focused on activity (What were people doing, wearing, carrying?), interpersonal interactions (Were people alone or in pairs, clusters, or groups?),

emotional expression (Were they laughing, shouting, gesticulating, frowning, crying, etc.?), and physical setting (natural, such as plants and streams, and constructed, such as buildings, walkways, shade gardens, fences, gates). For the purpose of understanding context, I made sensory observations (e.g., smells and tastes from cafeterias, heat or cold from climate or indoor air control, noise from campus and surrounding). In six countries I was also able to meet with a representative of the Ministry of Education or similar policy agency.

In China, an instructor familiar with my study acted as an interpreter during student focus groups; I conducted all other interviews and focus groups in English, with occasional translations to clarify concepts and language. The study was approved by the institutional review board at Michigan State University and the research review committees of any institution for which local approval was required. As part of the consent process, I agreed not to name individual campuses but to give them pseudonyms as I do in this analysis. In total, data amounts to 198 hours of recorded individual interviews, 48 hours of focus groups, 3.5 linear feet of campus artifacts, and a profile of each institution compiled from online documents, as well as a database of information collected from online and documentary sources about each nation.

Data analysis proceeded in the tradition of open coding and thematic development in qualitative research (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). In analyzing the role of women's institutions in providing access to higher education, I used open coding procedures and a priori codes (Boyatzis, 1998) derived from a prior international study of women's institution students (Renn & Lytle, 2010) to develop cross-case categories. Across the three years of data collection and analysis, I employed an iterative process of interpretation, checking new codes and themes against previously collected data. The purposeful variation of institutional type, contexts, history, mission, and governance resulted in the intended diversity of institutional roles, yet I was able to identify common themes on the topic of access.

Researcher positionality

The outcomes of qualitative research depend substantially on the positionality of the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 2014), and it is essential in feminist standpoint and transnational feminist perspectives to understand the researcher's subjectivity (Olesen, 2011). I am a higher education scholar based in the U.S., where I was born, raised, and hold citizenship. I was a university administrator before becoming a faculty member. I am an alumna of Mount Holyoke College, a liberal arts college that is one of the world's oldest continuing women's institutions. This affiliation facilitated access to an organization of women's college and university leaders (Women's Education Worldwide, WEW) and provided some degree of "insider" status at the institutions I visited. I am white, able-bodied, and middle-aged, characteristics

likely ascribed to me by anyone I encountered on the campuses I studied. My digital presence is easily accessible by search engine and reveals my commitment to research on mixed race students and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues in US higher education. I met with two campus leaders who had copies of my online vita with them at the time of our interviews; presumably other people I met had also located my online materials. All of these characteristics influenced how I conducted the study and interpreted data as well as how the people I encountered positioned themselves in relation to me and my study. Specifically, I am inclined to believe that women's colleges and universities are a worthwhile sector in postsecondary education and therefore may be overly positive in my interpretation of their contributions to access. And, though I attempted to maintain a neutral approach to participants, through the course of engagement with them before, during, and after my visits, I developed ongoing collegial relationships and friendships with some.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is critical to evaluating the quality of qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Throughout the study, I aimed to maintain trustworthiness in data collection, analysis, and interpretation. I consulted scholars native to the countries in the study when developing interview and focus group protocols; these consultations resulted in protocols that used language and higher education concepts appropriate to local contexts. For example, I used local terms for institutional leaders (e.g., principal, rector, president, chancellor) students' curriculum (e.g., course, syllabus, major), and policies related to access for underrepresented students (e.g., affirmative action, reservation, quota).

I used several strategies to enhance trustworthiness when analyzing data on the role of women's institutions in providing access. I consulted with scholars native to each country (not otherwise involved in the study, but often affiliated with the institution as faculty, staff, or local alumna) when I was coding data and developing themes; in several cases these colleagues redirected my attention to aspects of the local context and culture that I had overlooked (e.g., local dynamics among religious communities in Mumbai or recent incidents of sexual assault against women on co-educational campuses in Nairobi). I also checked my interpretations against alternate explanations and discrepant cases in the data (Boyatzis, 1998; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). Relying on the vertical case study design (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006) to provide rich, multi-level data also bolstered trustworthiness within case (i.e., in understanding a single case) and across cases (i.e., in comparing what faculty at different institutions reported about admissions standards). Finally, throughout the process of data collection and interpretation, I had opportunities to share my emerging findings with colleagues from the *WEW*

organization, and these colleagues raised questions and insights that caused me to return to the data for further analysis.

Limitations

This study is limited by at least four factors. First, a short research visit to any higher education institution results in an incomplete understanding of that institution. Second, cultural differences and intercultural communication necessarily exacerbate the first limitation. Third, key informants' participant selection for interviews and focus groups was a combination of purposeful (i.e., based on positions held at the institution) and convenience (e.g., who was available and willing to attend). This combination compounds the effect of the previous two limitations and introduces the possibility that key informants wanted me to see a particular side of their institution. Finally, the presence of an instructor acting as translator in focus groups in China may have influenced student responses; to account for this limitation, I exclude from the analyses for this article the data collected during that focus group unless it was also corroborated outside that meeting. Given these limitations, there is still something to be learned about the role of women's colleges and universities in providing access to higher education in the 21st century.

FINDINGS

As noted earlier, single-sex institutions opened access to girls and women at a time when existing institutions refused to admit them and because coeducation where it existed was not considered acceptable or desirable for every female student who wanted to attend. Scholars (Altbach, 2004; Knight, 2004; Radha, 2011; Sahni & Shankar, 2012) have asserted that women's institutions in the 21st century carry out this legacy by providing access to higher education in cultural and political contexts where coeducation remains unacceptable. Yet my analysis of the ways that women's institutions provide access to higher education reveals a more nuanced picture of three themes: legal access, practical access, and cultural access.

Legal access

Until recently, single-sex public higher education was the official policy of only a small number of Muslim nations in the Middle East. Since 2009, government-supported universities in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar now operate universities that enroll women and men but which are gender-segregated by curriculum, class schedules, facilities, or campus location (see Jamjoom & Kelly, 2013; Lipka, 2012; Naidoo & Moussly, 2009). Some of these gender-segregated institutions were originally for women (e.g., Zayed University in the UAE); others were opened for men and women (e.g., King Saud University in Saudi Arabia). Although technically coeducational, women and

men may remain physically separate (Jamjoom & Kelly, 2013), and coeducation may be prohibited at other institutions operating in these countries (e.g., Saudi Arabia). Given these recent policy shifts, there are no nations where women's colleges and universities are the *only* legal options for access to higher education. As noted, there are a few regions where some political or religious extremists enforce de facto segregation – or prevent women from attending educational institutions altogether – but these self-styled enforcers do not represent national educational policy. For safety reasons, I did not include these regions in my study, but they deserve particular notice from advocates for girls' and women's education worldwide.

In light of these developments, can it be said that women-only institutions play a role in legal access to higher education? Legally no, but in practice yes. Women can attend Middle Eastern “coeducational” public universities in which gender-segregation is national policy and men and women do not mix on campus or even, in some cases, in online courses. I argue that these campuses are, for all intents and purposes, single-sex. For example, I visited a campus of one of the three state-sponsored women's institutions in the UAE, Middle East Women's College, or MEWC; two of the three the national institutions have gender-segregated campuses spread across the emirates. MEWC is one of 17 gender-segregated campuses of a national institution that focuses on preparing young Emiratis for the workforce (e.g., business, education, engineering technology, computer and information science, applied communication, health sciences). MEWC enrolls around 2000 students, all Emiratis, who pay no tuition. Within the context of the larger institution, which enrolls men and women, MEWC admits “Daughters of a national mother” (MEWC website) and female graduates of UAE high schools, including adult learners. The rector noted,

The Ministry [of Education] supports MEWC and its sister and brother colleges as distinct entities. They opened before coeducation in public education was legally available and they remain single-sex for all intents and purposes, even now that there are some options within public policy for mixed education.

UAE law does not now prevent women from attending mixed-gender institutions. Women in the UAE may attend coeducational private universities, most of them branch campuses of foreign universities. Women outnumber men three to one in enrollment at one of the other national institutions, at which men and women share a campus, though academic programs are separated by gender. Within this context, MEWC cannot claim the role of providing access that would not otherwise legally exist, nor can any other institution I studied. But as I discuss later, MEWC joins several other women's institutions in providing practical and cultural access to higher education for women who would not be able to attend were it not for a gender-segregated environment and affordable (or no) cost.

From the evidence I collected during my site visits and developments in coeducation (even if in name only) in the most restrictive national contexts, I conclude that the time is near when no woman in the world will be prohibited by law or unlawful intervention (e.g., extremist threat or action) from obtaining a higher education. Periodic violence against girls and women in schools and higher education provide a distressing reminder, however, that resistance remains fierce and there is much room for progress. Women's institutions remain critical opportunities in restrictive contexts, in part because the movement to gender-segregated coeducation in some Middle Eastern countries has been so recent that the vast majority of seats for women in higher education continue to be at women-only public institutions. In the next section, I discuss practical aspects of women's access to higher education.

Practical access

Though the centrality of their role in providing legal access to higher education has waned, women's colleges and universities continue to play a role in practical matters related to accessing higher education. Two primary mechanisms through which these institutions provide access to higher education are financial and academic. Through them, women's institutions provide opportunities for students who might not otherwise be able to attend university. And, these practical considerations highlight the intersectionality of gender and social class in girls' and women's education globally.

Financial access. As in the US, where women's colleges serve a larger proportion of needy students than do their coeducational peers (Fischer, 2008), women's institutions in some other countries play a role in financial access to higher education. Although the UAE has a reputation as a flashy international business hub, the MEWC rector reported that one-third of his students come from families of modest means, where tuition-free public (and thus gender-segregated) higher education is the only affordable option. One MEWC student remarked, "The college even gave me money to buy the laptop that is required for my attendance. My family was so surprised!"

In other national contexts, financial aid and scholarships enabled students to attend women's institutions. Scholarships for Aboriginal women in Australia opened doors to the women's college within the university. One student commented, "And now I see other girls at home and tell them that it's true—they really can go to uni[versity]. There are ways to pay for it." Scholarships set aside for returning adult students at a women's college in the UK performed a similar function, and the Italian college reserved spaces free of charge for talented women from modest backgrounds.

At Urban Comprehensive University (UCU) in India, affordable tuition, scholarships, and academic programs that incorporated work with learning made it possible for women in a range of economic circumstances to attend. An adult student remarked, "I am able to keep my job as a bookkeeper during

the day so that I can pay my children's school fees, and then UCU gives me a bursary that helps with my own [fees]." The founding mission of UCU – a 70,000 student university comprised of dozens of component colleges – was the education of widows and other women displaced from Indian society. UCU continued this mission into the 21st century by placing within women's reach a host of vocational, professional, arts, humanities, and science degree programs at all postsecondary levels.

Similar scholarship and financial aid schemes might be available to men and to women at coeducational institutions in these countries, but I argue that the particular emphasis on setting aside resources for women (Australia, UK) and on designing academic programs so that women could afford them while tending to their household responsibilities (India) represent gendered opportunities for financial access to higher education. "I come to class in the evening after I work, and my older daughter watches the younger ones. Otherwise, I could not come here," said another woman at UCU. The intersection of gender, family background, and social class circumscribes aspirations for and access to higher education; worldwide, girls from poor families are the least likely to achieve any education, never mind postsecondary education (Renn, 2014; Stromquist, 2001, 2012). Efforts by women's institutions like those in my study to address these intersections contribute to increasing access for women.

Academic access. In addition to financial considerations, academic preparation interacts with gender to advance the role of women's colleges and universities in extending access to higher education. It is important to understand women's academic access to postsecondary education in the context of overall access within a national system. Where demand for higher education vastly outstrips available supply (e.g., China, India, Indonesia, Kenya), hundreds of thousands of talented men and women a year will be excluded from participating. As noted earlier, gender acts intersectionally with social class, religion, and culture to compound the challenge of access where girls are denied early schooling and parents keep their daughters out of advanced education in favor of keeping them at home or spending scarce resources on sons. For example, a student at UCU remarked that her parents scraped together tuition for her brothers to attend a private school but she and her sisters "made do with the government school, even though we knew it wasn't as good."

In Australia, Canada, China, India, Italy, Japan, Kenya, South Korea, and the UK, as in the U.S., women have access to all of the most prestigious institutions and many families are eager to send their daughters to national universities, no matter the cost. Extreme competition for admission to coeducational universities keeps many students out of their desired institutions, even if they find admission elsewhere. And for less well-prepared students,

the extreme competition does foreclose access, particularly if families cannot afford to send their children to less selective institutions overseas or private universities in country. In these contexts, women's colleges perform a role in college choice, perhaps, but not necessarily in absolute access to college.

Though institutional leaders were typically hesitant to state it so bluntly, the reality was that admissions requirements (or cutoff scores) at many women's institutions were lower than requirements at coeducational institutions of comparable reputation. This phenomenon varied according to national context and markets of higher education. In nations that are far from meeting overall demand for higher education (e.g., China, India, Kenya), women's universities provide a net gain – albeit relatively small in national context – of seats for which the potential competitive pool is half the size of that of coeducational institutions. In China and Kenya, furthermore, single-sex education is far outside the norm (China has three women's institutions; Kenya has one), and the applicant pool may be further reduced because even some women hesitate to apply to women's universities. At Women's Federation University (WFU) in China, all but two of the 24 students I interviewed ended up there because, like hundreds of thousands of their peers, they wanted to attend university in Beijing but their scores on the *gaokao* (national entrance exam) did not qualify them for admission at any other institution in the capitol city. Though most had never heard of WFU and did not want to attend a women's university, in light of their academic qualifications, their desire to study in Beijing outweighed their misgivings; rather than attend a coeducational institution elsewhere, they enrolled in WFU. As one student said, "I did not know about WFU before I was applying to universities, but after my score, it was come here or stay at home and go to [a provincial university]."

African Women's University of Science and Technology (AWUST), a private institution just seven years old when I visited, similarly offered admission to some students who did not meet the academic cutoff for the national universities. In Kenya, private institutions compete with one another while embedded in a larger higher education system where more affordable public institutions are far from meeting demand. Even with a gender-based affirmative action policy that allows women a slightly lower required score on the national secondary exit exam (according to the minister of higher education, the score was 63 for women when I visited, recently raised to 64; 65 for men), competition for admission to public universities is stiff. The vice-chancellor stated, "We take girls who might not get into Kenyatta [University], but they are able to do the work." AWUST occupied a market niche, one feature of which was that it would admit women who were not academically qualified for the public universities (it also offered other features that contribute to access, which I describe in the next section).

In India, women's colleges and universities are numerous yet they are viewed by some high school students as less desirable than their coeducational counterparts. I visited two colleges at the elite end of the admissions spectrum; within a national context of far greater demand for higher education than is available, Catholic College of Mumbai (CCM) and Elite College (EC) each admit less than 1% of qualified applicants and do not compromise academic standards in comparison to coeducational or men's colleges. But Urban Comprehensive University (UCU), the conglomerate of 26 colleges and 70,000 students on three campuses, has a history of serving women from disadvantaged backgrounds as well as a continuing practice of adult education and vocational training. Depending on the college and academic program within UCU, admission may remain competitive, as it is for other public universities in India, but applicants who would not be admitted to comparable coeducational universities are offered opportunities to matriculate here. The student whose family sent her brothers to private school while she and the other girls in the family attended poor quality government schools believes that her preparation for college exams "suffered from that," but UCU admitted her anyway.

In Japan and South Korea, as in the U.S., the tradition of single-sex education was longstanding, and the women's institutions I visited there had historical prestige. The rectors, faculty, and even some students themselves told me, however, that because coeducation is so strongly preferred, applicant pools for these universities were smaller than for comparably prestigious coeducational peers in desirable urban locations. Many women were admitted to these universities who would not have made the academic cut at the coeducational institutions. "Yes, we do take some students who are not at the very top, but still we are highly selective in our admission," said a faculty member at one of the two Japanese institutions I visited. Access to higher education itself is not limited to women's colleges, but access to elite colleges and universities in preferred locations was limited practically by students' scores on national entrance exams. In China, Japan, India, South Korea, and Kenya, gender actually expanded access to higher education, because if these students were men with the same entrance exam scores, they would potentially not have had the option of attending university in Beijing, Tokyo, Mumbai, Delhi, Seoul, or Nairobi.

Cultural access

If women's colleges and universities no longer, for the most part, provide access to women who otherwise would by law or policy have none, and if a limited argument can be made for their contribution to practical access, is there any remaining claim to be made for them as critical venues for access to higher education? I maintain that there is. In some regions where coeducational higher education is legal and where women have practical (financial

and academic) resources to attend any university, there remain substantial cultural barriers to women's access. Where higher education is legally coeducational but in actuality gender segregated (e.g., separate campuses or facilities for men and women), women's institutions provide access to students who would not choose, or whose families would not permit, coeducation. Religious conservatism – Muslim, Hindu, and Christian – appears to play a substantial role in this phenomenon, though it is not the only factor.

Cultural barriers to coeducation are perhaps most visible in the Middle East, where public institutions remain gender segregated. Students at MEWC could, if their families could afford it and would permit it, attend coeducational private universities in the city. But to many students and families, coeducation remains culturally and religiously questionable. Though the UAE has a reputation as a modern nation engaged in global commerce, and Abu Dhabi and Dubai are hubs for branch campuses of foreign universities, MEWC students “would not be able to attend higher education unless there was a single-sex option that was seen as physically, morally, and culturally safe,” according to the rector. MEWC maintains a highly secured campus on which students are protected from unwanted or untoward contact with men by locked gates, careful monitoring of visitors, and rules that forbid them from leaving campus during the day. The rector stated that parents and husbands who might not otherwise permit women to attend higher education find these measures re-assuring; many students also stated that they found coeducation culturally unacceptable and without the women's college, they would not choose to continue their education.

In India, Muslim and Hindu religious conservatism constrained some students' choices to attend women's institutions. Indeed, the growth in recent decades in the number of women's institutions in India is in large part because women's colleges in rural areas “are the latest innovation and greatly needed to provide conservative religious women appropriate conditions under which to receive an education” (Knight, 2004, p. 80). I visited only urban institutions (in Mumbai and Delhi), and even in major metropolitan areas, religious and cultural conservatism restricted women's options. Local women from conservative families would not be permitted to attend a coeducational university, but UCU was an acceptable option, as were EC and CCM for those qualified for admission at elite colleges. A Muslim UCU student in burqa and hijab said:

My parents know that there are boys on campus and we have many men professors, but they did not want me in classes all the time with boys, and I understand that. Maybe when they see that I am ok here they will let my little sister go to a mixed school. I don't know, though, because we have always gone to girls' schools.

Exceptionally talented Hindu women from outlying states reported that they would have been allowed to attend a less prestigious coeducational institution and live at home, but the women's colleges provided culturally acceptable access to nationally top-ranked academic programs. Their families permitted them to move to Mumbai or Delhi to live in on-campus hostels, which provided curfews, gated campuses, and protection from the outside world (it is worth noting that students were free to come and go from these campuses at will; students may have been less cloistered than their parents believed them to be, a fact that some students relayed with some degree of hushed glee). "This school has the number one program in [academic field], and it's all girls, so my parents said I could leave [rural province]. If it had boys, no way!" said a lower-caste student at CCM. At these elite colleges and at the more academically accessible UCU, substantial proportions of the women whom I interviewed indicated that coeducational higher education was not an acceptable option for them. Some would have stopped their education after high school if women's institutions were not available, others would have attended far less prestigious institutions near home. In either case, the women's institutions provided culturally acceptable access to higher education.

AWUST serves a similar purpose for students from conservative Christian families in rural Kenya. Similar to Indian women from outlying states, some women at AWUST reported that although they had the academic credentials to be admitted to the coeducational public universities, their parents would not allow them to attend. AWUST has two campuses: an urban one that serves women who live with their families and a residential rural campus far outside the crime-ridden university areas in Nairobi. For women from rural villages who had to leave home to attend university, AWUST offered a physically and morally safe option that was worth paying private tuition to attend. According to one faculty member, "We protect our girls, and the families know that, so they are ok with sending their daughters here to us."

To a much lesser extent, women's institutions in Italy, the UK, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Canada offer cultural access to higher education. I encountered few students, including two international students and three recent immigrants, at these universities who said that they would not have been allowed to attend a coeducational institution. But some first-generation college students, students from rural areas, and students from minority tribes, races, and castes, believed that women's colleges offered a more inviting environment in which to enter higher education than did coeducational institutions. A few of these women applied *only* to women's institutions, usually in agreement with their parents' wishes (one woman had no other option, though she expressed resentment at her family for their insistence on gender segregated higher education: "They don't think I'd be safe with

boys at school, but I know I would be”). A first-generation college-going Aboriginal Australian student stated, “It was going to be hard enough at uni[versity] coming from the countryside, and [Australian Women’s College] took away some of that fear. I thought being with the girls would help me get on.” Because the women’s institutions I visited in Italy, the UK, Australia, and Canada were residential colleges within coeducational universities, they served as, according to one administrator, “safe oas[es] where parents get what they want – an all-girls college – and students get what they want – boys.”

Cultural access runs the gamut from quite constraining (UAE) to barely so (Italy, UK, Australia, Canada, Japan, South Korea), yet it remains a force in the ongoing importance of women’s colleges and universities in providing access to higher education. The most complex case may be India, where coeducation is widespread, but large communities of religiously conservative Muslims and Hindus strongly prefer gender-segregated education for their daughters. There, women from more liberal families can apply to whatever institutions their academic achievement puts within reach, while substantial numbers of equally talented others are constrained to colleges and universities their families deem culturally acceptable – whether that means leaving home to attend an elite women’s college or staying home and attending a local institution.

Summary of findings

Access, then, is a complex matter of policy, practice, and culture. In a context imbued with intersectional influences of gender, social class, caste, religion, and culture, gender-segregated institutions – women only, or women and men on separate campuses – provide the only access to higher education in a few nations, the only affordable (public) higher education in a few more, and the only culturally acceptable options in a greater number. Women’s colleges and universities are thus important components of a global system of women’s access to higher education. They are also critical locally for the education of women from a range of social class backgrounds and families. I argue that in a small number of countries (from my study, India, Kenya, and the UAE), women’s colleges and universities play an *essential* role in providing access to higher education for women; they are also *important*, if not essential, in providing higher education opportunities in other countries where talented women may not have financial, academic, or cultural access to coeducational institutions. Gender interacts with social class, academic achievement, religious values, and culture to constrain women’s educational choices; women’s colleges and universities open doors otherwise closed to academically talented women.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY, AND RESEARCH

The primary implication of these findings for higher education practice and policy is that gender-segregated and women's institutions in regions where higher education access is restricted by law, practical considerations, and culture must remain open and not admit (or fully integrate) men into their academic programs. The opportunity to study and, for some, live at a women's college or university is the only realistic option for large numbers of students worldwide. My visits to the UAE, Kenya, and India provide evidence of this need. The opening of AWUST, as well as the expansion of women's universities in Saudi Arabia (e.g., Princess Nora Bint Abdulrahman University, see Ajbaili, 2011; Almansour & Kempner, 2015) confirms the importance of women's higher education institutions, as does the recent announcement of plans to open more women's colleges and universities in India (*Times of India*, 2012). Developing or enlarging additional women's institutions in regions where access to coeducation is proscribed remains important to expanding access to higher education for women.

The case for women's institutions as a means of access to higher education is much less strong in the other seven nations I visited; a relative handful of students there indicated that they would be blocked entirely from higher education without the option to study at a women's college. Historically, several of these institutions were the only option for women, but in a largely coeducational higher education marketplace they cannot claim to be primarily agents of access. To be sure, they admit and provide affordable education for women who might not have access to coeducational institutions of similar historical stature. But their primary role is not one of access (see Renn, 2012, 2014 for discussion of other roles of women's institutions). Women's institutions in contexts like these that compete for talented applicants might consider more targeted marketing at populations less likely to consider coeducation a viable option; in the face of declining interest in women's colleges in the U.S., for example, these institutions have looked to the Middle East as rich ground for recruiting students (Lewin, 2008).

From a theoretical and research perspective, the findings on access suggest opportunities for exploring in more depth students' motivations for attending women's institutions, intersectional (e.g., gender, class, and race/tribe/caste) analyses of access to higher education, and the impact of the availability of gender-segregated higher education on girls' pre-college educational aspiration and attainment. Knowing more about why women in countries with equal access to coeducation choose gender-segregated higher education could lead to recommendations for recruiting students to these institutions and/or to changes in admissions and financial aid practices at coeducational institutions. Intersectional research designs and analyses could facilitate understanding of complex and deeply entrenched inequalities in

societies around the world. Knowing if and how aspirations for college may be shaped in girls when they know that there are postsecondary options available might lead to recommendations for improving gender equity and outcomes in elementary and secondary education as well.

There is clearly a role for intersectional analysis in considering the role of women's colleges and universities in providing access to higher education. The educational pipeline – early childhood through secondary school – is shaped by intersections of gender, social class, religion, caste, and culture, with a large number of girls and women in some countries (e.g., India, UAE, Kenya) accumulating educational disadvantage in comparison to boys and men. When families cannot afford to send all children to quality schools, when decisions are made to accommodate conservative religious values, or when local culture invokes indifference, hostility, or violence against girls' education, then women's access to higher education is decreased. The role of single-gender institutions in these contexts deserves continued study.

CONCLUSION

Women's higher education may indeed be “the great unfinished agenda of the 21st century” (Creighton, 2004). In a global context in which higher education opportunity is not evenly distributed, gender plays a distinct role in keeping women out in ways that are not true for men. To be sure, lagging capacity to enroll all students who could succeed in higher education limits opportunities for men as well as women, but women face additional challenges related to legal, practical, and cultural barriers to access at coeducational institutions. The availability of women's colleges and universities addresses these barriers and remains a critical component of access to higher education worldwide.

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