

# Gender, Class Identity, and Academic Competence among Women in Higher Education

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## ABSTRACT

Education serves as a powerful medium for self-development, empowerment, and social mobility. For women in particular, access to education provides opportunities to construct new personal and social identities that extend beyond traditional domestic roles. For women from working-class backgrounds, entering the academic environment often involves navigating complex social and cultural transitions. In many cases, students may feel pressure to distance themselves from aspects of their class identity in order to adapt to dominant academic norms. Academic competence is not solely an innate attribute but is shaped by social interactions, institutional structures, and the perceptions of others. Responses from peers and faculty members can significantly influence students' confidence, sense of belonging, and academic performance. This study explores the ways in which stereotypes influence the self-concept and academic competence of working-class women in higher education. A qualitative method was employed for this study. Participants' interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that participants encounter subtle yet persistent socio-cultural barriers in higher education. However, they demonstrate considerable resilience, determination, and ambition in pursuing their educational goals. The study emphasizes the need for further research and greater institutional support to better address gender issues, social-class identity, and competence in women's academic journeys.

**Keywords:** Gender, self-concept, stereotype, academic competence

## INTRODUCTION

In higher education, the gender gap is not always the result of discrimination but is sometimes attributed to a lack of motivation or desire to pursue certain fields (Good, Rattan, & Dweck, 2012). There is increasing gender parity in academia in terms of faculty and student representation. However, the desire to pursue a course is highly influenced by environmental factors. For example, in disciplines such as mathematics, women are often less willing to pursue studies due to prevailing stereotypes that question their abilities in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields.

Stereotypes create academic problems that can cause even academically bright students to falter. In society, certain groups are more heavily stereotyped and experience a fair share of peer rejection. Stereotyping contributes to performance gaps between stereotyped and non-stereotyped groups. Individuals who belong to stereotyped groups are often categorized as intellectually inferior. Croizet and Clare (1998) indicated that stereotype is linked with social class and correlate with test performance. Stereotypes influence people's thinking and behavior. In academic contexts, stereotypes imply intellectual inferiority and affect self-concept. Stereotypes inhibit the expression and development of competence (Aronson & Steele, 2007). When stereotypes are present, prejudices often follow (Devine, 1989), and these are typically applied to members of the stereotyped groups.

Consensual beliefs about the attributes of men and women often lead to restrictions on individual potential. Women are frequently perceived as caregivers who are warm and compassionate, whereas men are viewed as breadwinners who are ambitious and assertive (Eagly, Nater, Miller, Kaufmann, & Sczesny, 2019). Differential treatment based on social identity can result in negative behaviors and self-perceptions (Aronson & Steele, 2007). For instance, incompetence and negative behavior are often attributed to an individual's social

group membership. There is also a prevailing belief that in fields such as science and mathematics, girls succeed through effort, whereas boys succeed due to natural ability. Peers play a vital role in the development of achievement-related self-concept; therefore, stereotypes significantly influence women's academic self-concept. When certain groups are consistently underrepresented or appear to underperform, it should not be viewed merely as a reflection of their competence, but rather as a consequence of underlying social and psychological factors that shape their achievement.

### **Rationale of the Study**

Entering academia often demands that students internalize new cultural norms and values that may differ significantly from those of their previous class backgrounds. This transition can lead to self-negotiation, tension, and even alienation as individuals attempt to conform to the prevalent academic culture. Academic success is not solely determined by intellectual ability but is deeply influenced by social factors such as class, gender, and institutional culture. Understanding how these dynamics shape students' experiences is essential for developing more inclusive educational environments. This study seeks to highlight the often-overlooked challenges faced by working-class women in academia, emphasizing how structural inequalities and self-perceptions influence their confidence and academic performance.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Social Identity Theory (SIT), proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups. People tend to favor their in-group while overgeneralizing the traits of out-groups. Such overgeneralization reinforces group boundaries and helps individuals maintain a sense of belonging. According to Harwood (2020), social identity theory explains an individual's sense of belonging to a group and the positive or negative attributes associated with that membership. Humans instinctively categorize themselves and others into groups, leading to distinctions between "in-groups" and "out-groups."

SIT has been widely applied in the study of intergroup relations and differentiation. Through intergroup behavior, people perceive how others think, feel, and act toward them (Hogg, Abrams, & Brewer, 2017). Individuals generally behave in ways that help maintain their group's status and prestige (Hogg & Abrams, 2003). In the context of women in higher education, stereotypes related to social class and gender influence their self-concept and academic competence. Peer relationships and faculty interactions also play a role in shaping women's confidence. Academic competence is socially constructed and affected by gendered and class-based assumptions. Women who experience stereotyping may limit their participation, leading to anxiety, self-doubt, reduced performance, and questioning of their legitimacy within academic spaces.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The present study is exploratory in nature and was conducted at a college in Manipur, India, a state located in the northeastern region of the country. The study took place in a suburban area of Manipur. Participant selection was based on snowball sampling. Most of the participants were from hill areas and rural backgrounds. Their parents were employed in occupations such as teaching, the military, postal services, banking, and farming. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen female college students, all aged between 17 and 19 years. The study consisted of undergraduate students who had encountered gender-stereotypical assumptions related to education and competence. The participants shared their academic journeys and experiences, and based on their responses, several key themes were developed.

### **Themes**

#### **Generalized Beliefs and Differential Treatment**

College is a critical period for identity development and exploration. During this time, students become increasingly aware of their social class and gender identities. Many students experience gender intensification in relation to higher education and become more conscious of traditional stereotypes associated with gender.

Stereotypes related to social categories such as race and gender can influence boys and girls differently. Young people often have to negotiate conflicting stereotypes linked to their group memberships. For example, a Black boy may be associated with a positive stereotype regarding mathematical ability; however, in comparison to girls, negative stereotypes may also emerge in certain contexts (Evans, Copping, Rowley, & Kurtz-Costes, 2011).

### **One of the B.A. participants stated that**

“I have often seen that girls in many places are expected to be caring, affectionate, and nurturing. However, in my case, it has been completely different. My immediate relatives often tell me that I do not possess qualities such as warmth, shyness, or obedience. Instead, they describe me as cold, rough, and argumentative. It is not that I want to be argumentative, but sometimes I feel the need to express what I believe is right. I also have dreams for my life, just like my brother. My brother is allowed to do the things he likes—he can pursue further studies, explore different places, and our parents are willing to spend money when he asks. But when it comes to me, I am told that girls should stay at home and take care of the family. I am also told that money is limited and should be used wisely, and that spending on girls’ higher education is unnecessary. Instead, girls are expected to adjust to family circumstances and show a caring nature toward others. However, when my family saw my determination to pursue further studies, they eventually allowed me to continue my education. As a girl, I have faced a great deal of discouragement and intensified generalization. Even within the family, boys and girls are treated very differently, and society only extends these differences further.”

### **Another B.A. participant expressed that**

“Living in a village is often considered difficult. It is commonly said that a girl’s life is like glass—it looks beautiful when intact, but once it is broken, it can never be restored to its original form. Even if it can be repaired, it will never be the same as before. Living a dignified life is not easy, and parents often wish for their daughters to be married and settled as soon as possible so that they can gain respect in the eyes of society. So, they prefer to save money for this instead of spending it on further education.”

### **One of the B.A. participants shared**

“Within the household, the treatment of boys and girls often differs significantly. Parents tend to invest more effort and resources in boys’ education than in girls’. This disparity extends beyond education to the fulfillment of personal wishes, where greater emphasis is often placed on boys. Another factor affecting female students’ college aspirations is their reluctance to place a financial burden on their families. This can lead to reduced participation in higher education and, in some cases, an increased risk of dropout. Women, in general, tend to think carefully before pursuing their interests, often questioning whether their aspirations are necessary and how much burden they might impose on other family members. Moreover, when women make decisions without considering the needs of their family, they are often labeled as selfish or arrogant.”

Moreover, gender stereotypes formed during childhood have a significant impact on individuals, influencing gender-related self-perceptions and role-related behaviors (Li, 2025). People tend to internalize these stereotypes, which are then reflected in their social interactions and engagement with others. Individuals may experience identity conflict and psychological stress when they pursue nontraditional activities or careers. To avoid such stress and maintain a sense of social acceptance, individuals often conform to generalized gender norms, adhering to what are considered appropriate behaviors and roles expected of them.

### **Stereotypes Shape Social Interactions**

A person’s gender and class background significantly affect their academic experience (Baxter & Britton, 2001). Students from privileged backgrounds often possess greater academic credentials and participate more in extracurricular activities. In contrast, students from working-class backgrounds have fewer academic credentials and limited exposure to academic opportunities.

One B.A. student shared her experience:

I am not that good academically, but I'm trying to gain my rhythm and confidence. I have two siblings, and I am the eldest. I cannot think only about myself; I have to think about my parents as well. They work very hard to provide a good education and a better future for me and my younger sister. I'm lucky that I'm attending this college and that my parents let me stay in the hostel. My parents are farmers and do not earn much. Our village is very far from the college; it takes almost six hours by road to reach home. I cannot be like other friends—I have responsibilities and family obligations. For me, it doesn't matter what others think about gender. My father is a farmer, and I used to help him in every possible way. If a boy can do the same work in a day, I can also do it—it might just take me a bit longer. I joined college hoping that one day I would become a successful person and inspire other underprivileged people to achieve their goals.

Stereotypes are overgeneralized concepts that ignore individual differences. For instance, assumptions like “Asians are good at math,” “girls are bad at math,” or “men are better suited for leadership roles” are socially constructed and reinforced from an early age. People often generalize that when boys perform well in math or science, it is due to natural ability, but when girls succeed, it is attributed to effort. Additionally, women are judged by negative stereotypes that question their abilities, disrupting their performance (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999).

Another B.A. student shared:

I am not particularly good at math and science. People sometimes say girls are not good at these subjects. During my matriculation, I was very worried. I prayed just to pass. Thankfully, before the exam, my village organized a math coaching program that helped me a lot.

Incompetence is often openly attributed to certain groups (Aronson & Steele, 2007). Students strive to fit into their academic and social settings, fearing peer dislike or social exclusion. However, students from minority groups often face social rejection.

Another B.A. student revealed:

People's class backgrounds are not shown subtly; they are visible in every form—the way they present themselves, the way they speak, even the way they form their friend circles. One can see a hierarchy based on intelligence and social class. Many students like me don't have the courage to ask others to be friends.

### **Self-Concept**

The self refers to awareness of one's thoughts, sensations, and feelings. It is related to one's personality traits, social roles, and relationships. Self-concept, as Baumeister (1997) explains, exists in one's mind and can be negotiated and redefined.

One student shared:

I want someone from my background or ethnic community in my class so that we can understand each other better. My classmates are good—it's not that I don't interact with them— but they often form groups based on community, and I feel left out. I get nervous when presenting in class. It's not that I need company all the time, but it feels good when someone listens or understands you. It makes the class more engaging and helps me focus on my studies.

Academic self-concept encompasses how capable a person feels in academic life. This perception is shaped by experiences and is reciprocal with achievement.

Another B.A. student revealed:

I come from a family where peace is hard to find. During my childhood, my parents often fought. When my father wasn't drinking, he was the nicest man, but when he drank, he changed completely. I wanted to stop

studying after matriculation, but my mother encouraged me to continue. She told me that I was different from my other siblings and I was good at studies. She's no longer with us, but my elder sister supports and encourages me throughout my academic journey. Now, I put more effort into studying and try to build my confidence.

Students with higher academic self-concept often perform better and are more motivated to engage in learning activities (Ertl, Luttenberger, & Paechter, 2017).

### **Academic Competence**

There is a common assumption that students who score poorly are lazy or untalented. While this may be true in some cases, academic performance is often influenced by broader social factors. Intellectual competence is not a stable trait but a fragile construct shaped within a web of social relations (Aronson & Steele, 2007). How individuals are treated, whether they feel welcomed or excluded, greatly affects their learning and performance.

One B.A. student stated:

My academic journey has been good so far. I consider myself a good student. During my higher secondary exams, I got distinction marks in two subjects. I have four siblings-two elder brothers and one elder sister. My parents treat all of us equally, so I don't believe that ability differs based on gender. Once, I participated in a debate competition and realized all the other participants were male. I was nervous at first, but hearing my friends and cousins cheer for me gave me confidence.

Stereotypes influence academic engagement, self-concept, and competence. Teacher expectations can also play a crucial role. Previous studies show that minority and African American students often lag behind white students, even when attending the same schools and living in comparable neighborhoods (Aronson & Steele, 2007). Competence is socially constructed through how others perceive and treat an individual.

Another B.A. student narrated:

When I was in class 6, I changed schools. The teachers there were very strict, and we often got punished for small mistakes. I preferred to stay silent in class and the hostel. But one day, my hostel warden, who was also my class teacher, asked me to sing during a group program. I obeyed her, and that moment changed me. People started noticing me. From then on, I gained confidence, and my sense of competence improved drastically.

Ability, skills, and preparation vary across individuals, but consistent underperformance among certain groups warrants deeper examination of unaccounted cultural and social factors. Cultural influences shape academic performance. Although not everyone believes stereotypes, they remain culturally pervasive and affect behavior and expectations.

### **CONCLUSION**

An individual's self-concept shapes how they perceive their own abilities and social identity. Academic competence and achievement are not determined solely by innate ability but are influenced by complex social and cultural factors. For women from working-class backgrounds, stereotypes related to both gender and class often create invisible barriers that affect confidence and motivation. Although many of these women encounter subtle forms of bias and exclusion, they also demonstrate remarkable resilience, adaptability, and ambition. Their experiences highlight the transformative power of education when students receive encouragement and recognition. Addressing stereotypes within academic spheres requires more than awareness; it demands structural change to promote inclusion through mentorship, representation, and culturally responsive learning environments. Recognizing the intersections of class, gender, and identity is essential to fostering equitable learning environments in which all students can thrive.

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