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Book Review: Valued Daughters, First Generation Career Women

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***Valued Daughters, First Generation Career Women.* Alice W. Clark. Sage Publishing India, 2016. Pages 199. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-93-515-0888-5. \$40.00**

Reviewed by Madhavi Venkatesan¹

In *Valued Daughters, First Generation Career Women*, Alice Clark, a self-defined feminist historian, provides a glimpse into the lives first generation college-educated Indian women. The book, an outcome of one-on-one, private interviews with female college students across India, catalogues without interpretation, the perceptions, expectations and familial relationships, bonds and obligations that the participants have formed. The focus of the book is the relationship between female educational attainment and career workforce entry as a channel for increasing gender parity. This assertion though not explicitly stated appears to adopt the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) perspective that a significant part of creating an enabling environment for the development of autonomous agency of women relates to their opportunities to take an active part in both the creation of knowledge and economic activity. In order to create such an environment, some basic conditions need to be made available, such as access to education and to the production and distribution of knowledge, as well as, access to economic participation, specifically the right to work and the capacity to self-empowerment and self-determination.

In detailing the background of each female subject along with their familial context and geographic location, the book succeeds in providing an understanding of how the young women have been influenced by cultural norms, parental limitations and freedoms, as well as the societal projection of their status in molding their identity. Similarly, in relaying the characteristics that describe the young women within their specific temporal context, the book provides an opportunity to connect the on-going evolution of society with the progressive outlook shared by these women.

Clark acknowledges that the book is based on the lives of relatively fortunate young women. As a result the book offers a biased perspective, as it does not provide an assessment of the outlook of the majority of young Indian women who face less opportunity with little to no choice in determining their future. Clark does sidestep this limitation by noting that social change is typically shepherded by those who "have" rather than those who "have not." However, a counter argument could be made that an understanding of the perceptions of those least fortunate would provide a perspective on both limitations and potential areas for enhanced traction with respect to gender parity. For example, less fortunate women may be the victims of cultural limitations and yet also the most significant beneficiaries of incremental progress.

The book's nine chapters provide a snapshot perspective of the intergenerational evolution of the status of women and the impact of gender imbalance on women's access to higher education. Each chapter focuses on a different element of the historical relationship between men and women. Starting with the traditional patriarchal ascribed roles, continuing through access to education, professional aspirations, the role of fathers in promoting the status of their daughters, traction of

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gender equality, and the role of parenting, the book provides insight with respect to specific contexts.

Using life experiences of women across distinct geographies in India, the discussion incorporates both their self-directed desire for higher education and the perception of status to accompany degree completion. Clark does document and highlight the culturally based familial tie of college attainment as a means to both supplement the parental household and or promote its social status. The discussion of attribution of economic status and disproportionate gender based responsibility for parental welfare are highlighted as the present period catalysts for societal acceptance of the significance of female education, and as Clark alludes to, a foundation for liberalizing the status of women.

Each woman's responses provide an opportunity to understand a perspective. Though a seemingly individual perspective, the information conveyed is proffered in demographic context, enabling the opportunity for wider attribution as well. However, the life stories do have similarities; for example, it is clear that the women's expectations have been set based on understanding of opportunities. Given the limited opportunities available to mothers of these daughters and the existence of limited to no role models, the expectations shaped are limited and center on marriage and child-rearing. In a sense, the women interviewed are both victims and beneficiaries of their own circumstance.

For the majority of the young women interviewed, expectations were limited to steady employment through retirement. Job satisfaction, career mobility, and increasing status were not even part of the discussion of post-collegiate work life. Further, the subjects appeared to be unaware of how their education and work life would potentially contribute to a changing perception of their familial status and influence the social position of women in subsequent generations. The seeming unawareness of the subjects with respect to the transformative impact of their own educational attainment presents an opportunity for further assessment and evaluation.

Typically the attribution of social movement is made with respect to an organized and forward looking outcome related to actions set forth in the present. The fragmentation of educational attainment without organized consciousness related to a universal purpose or desired outcome is not consistent with organized equality movements in other countries. This leads to the question as to whether the educational attainment as discussed by Clark can and should be attributed to a movement toward gender parity. It is not clear from reading the book whether the default assumption was that access even though both fragmented and exhibiting an upward bias in terms of socio economic status was considered a sufficient influence for social change. From this perspective, another area of development and beneficial inclusion would have been the passive role of women with respect to implementing cultural change. In this case, gender equality as a cultural norm. Since women are often the ones engaging in transmission of language, value systems, religious beliefs and behavior to their children, women influence social change through their own life experience.

Alice Clark does succeed in giving the reader an optimistic view of the status of gender roles in India. However, the discussion is limited in many ways as noted above and also through exclusion increasing evidence of female objectification and victimization. *Valued Daughters, First Generation Career Women* is a 2016 publication and is contemporary with the routine violence reported against women in India. Questions detailing women's sense of marginalization or activism would have been both relevant and additive to the discussion, which overall presents an optimistic perspective on evolving gender roles.