

Women's Educational Equality as Expanding the Horizon of Choice

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Abstract

Educational equality for women cannot be considered complete when women merely gain access to education and successfully complete it. This conceptual study examines how substantive educational equality can encompass the benefits of education for women's meaningful post-education life choices. Using qualitative conceptual literature analysis, the study brings scholarship on gender equality in education, the capability approach, lifelong learning, and women's agency into dialogue. The analysis distinguishes achieved life outcomes (functionings), substantive opportunities to achieve valued outcomes (capabilities and opportunity freedom), and the exercise of voice and goal pursuit (agency). It proposes the "horizon of choice" as a related but distinct evaluative lens: the breadth of meaningful post-education life paths that women can recognize, deliberate upon, and realistically pursue. The concept does not rank employment, further study, marriage, family life, entrepreneurship, or combinations of these paths as superior outcomes. Instead, it asks whether meaningful alternatives are recognizable and substantively available and whether women can participate in deliberation within their social relationships. The contribution is therefore not to rename capability or agency, but to position the breadth of meaningful post-education life choices as an explicit dimension for evaluating substantive educational equality.

Keywords: educational equality; women; capability; agency; life choices

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1. INTRODUCTION

Gender equality in education has long been associated with access, participation, retention, learning, and completion. These dimensions remain indispensable because exclusion from education immediately constrains other opportunities. Yet recent scholarship shows why parity and observable educational achievements cannot by themselves capture the complexity of gender justice. Unterhalter, Longlands, and Peppin Vaughan (2022) demonstrate the limitations of measures that focus on visible outcomes while underrepresenting the social and institutional conditions through which educational resources become substantive opportunities. Their work places capabilities and intersecting inequalities within the evaluation of gender equality in education.

The insufficiency of schooling alone is also visible across the life course. Desmond et al. (2024) find that progress in girls' school enrolment and completion does not necessarily translate into equality later in life; women may face less favorable outcomes in workforce participation, pay, unpaid care, and political participation. Their analysis is especially relevant because it distinguishes the realization of human potential through schooling from the later conditions affecting its use. Educational equality therefore raises a question beyond completion: what meaningful possibilities become available because education has been obtained?

This question should not be confused with an argument that educated women ought to pursue employment or further study rather than marriage and family life. Marriage, motherhood, employment, entrepreneurship, further education, community participation, and combinations of these paths can all constitute valuable lives. Treating paid employment as the universal indicator of empowerment would merely replace one externally prescribed model with another. The substantive issue is whether a path is genuinely chosen from meaningful alternatives or becomes the only socially imaginable direction because of gender.

Research on women's agency already demonstrates the complexity of post-education choice. Aisyah (2022), through biographical narratives of young Indonesian Muslim women, examines higher education, lifelong study, career paths, and deliberation over becoming a full-time mother. Her study shows that education can be associated with self-development and the capability to choose while life decisions remain embedded in religious and social commitments. This evidence means that post-education choice and women's agency cannot defensibly be presented as unexplored topics.

The capability approach itself is also established rather than novel. Chen, Yang, and Wu's (2024) scoping review of 80 empirical studies shows that the approach has been used extensively in women's studies, with education and development among prominent areas. In educational research, MacKenzie and Chiang (2023) use the human development and capability approach to show how structural constraints can jeopardize students' agency. Diwakar (2023) similarly demonstrates the usefulness of capability-oriented analysis for understanding intersecting inequalities that constrain people's freedoms in education.

The conceptual foundations for evaluating education beyond access are likewise well developed. Sen (1999) frames development in terms of the substantive freedoms people have to lead lives they value, and Nussbaum (2000) extends this orientation to women's lives by asking what women are actually able to do and to be, rather than what resources they formally possess. In education, Walker and Unterhalter (2007) bring the capability approach into questions of social justice, including gender equality, while Unterhalter (2007) links gender, schooling, and global social justice. Robeyns (2006) contrasts human capital, rights, and capability models of education and argues that the intrinsic aim of educational policy should be the expansion of people's capabilities, with particular attention to gender. Robeyns (2017) further clarifies that the general capability approach differs from the more specific capability theories built on it. This distinction matters here because the horizon of choice proposed in this article is offered as one specific analytical lens rather than as a replacement for the general approach.

Work on empowerment and aspiration points in a similar direction. Kabeer (1999) treats the ability to make strategic life choices as the interaction of resources, agency, and achievements, and stresses that the meaning of an achievement depends on the conditions under which choices are made. Zimmermann (2024) shows that agency and the capability to aspire shape each other over time, so aspirations cannot be treated as fixed preferences that education simply reveals. Taken together, these strands suggest that educational equality for women should be assessed not only by what women achieve after schooling but also by the range of meaningful alternatives that education helps make recognizable, available, and open to deliberation.

Recent Indonesian scholarship provides a broader state of the art. Andang's (2026) systematic review of 58 Scopus-indexed studies published from 2020 to March 2026 identifies sociocultural norms, socioeconomic inequality, gender bias, and institutional limitations as recurring concerns, while also highlighting education's relationship with empowerment, mobility, and economic participation. Indonesian research outside education likewise illustrates that women's agency can be exercised through negotiation and participation under structural constraints rather than being understood simply as unrestricted individual autonomy (Listiani et al., 2025).

The relevance of the problem extends to lifelong and non-formal learning. Kalenda et al. (2024), using international survey data, show that apparently similar overall participation rates can conceal gender differences across forms of adult education and training, including job-related and employer-sponsored non-formal education. Alam et al. (2024) also connect skills development and lifelong learning with sustainable career planning and gender equality. These studies reinforce the need to examine not merely participation but what forms of opportunity education enables across different stages of life.

Capability set, opportunity freedom, and agency provide related but analytically distinct reference points. A capability set concerns the combinations of functionings that are substantively attainable, while opportunity freedom concerns a person's real opportunity to achieve valued functionings. Agency is

broader than the availability of options because it concerns a person's freedom to pursue goals and values that the person has reason to advance, including through participation in processes of deliberation and action (Sen, 1985). The concepts may therefore overlap in practice without becoming interchangeable.

The "horizon of choice" proposed here does not replace these concepts. It directs evaluation toward the breadth and intelligibility of meaningful post-education life paths within the field of substantive opportunities: which paths can be recognized as legitimate possibilities, meaningfully considered, and realistically pursued. A capability set identifies substantive opportunities; agency concerns the pursuit of valued goals; the horizon of choice asks how broad and meaningfully navigable the post-education field of alternatives is. Against this background, the article identifies a narrower conceptual gap: whether this breadth of meaningful post-education choices can be treated explicitly as a dimension for evaluating educational equality itself. This formulation is an author-developed analytical synthesis, not a claim that prior scholarship has ignored women's agency, capabilities, structural constraints, or post-education choice.

Accordingly, this study asks: how should substantive educational equality for women be conceptualized beyond equal access and educational completion to encompass the expansion of meaningful post-education life choices? Its objective is to construct the expansion of the horizon of choice as an evaluative dimension of women's educational equality. The argument extends rather than replaces concerns with access, continuity, quality, and completion: education should widen women's choices without dictating which choice they must make.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative conceptual literature analysis rather than a systematic or exhaustive review. The unit of analysis was the conceptual relationship among educational equality, capability, agency, lifelong learning, and post-education choice. The literature was selected purposively through a concept-driven process based on its relevance to those relationships. Relevant literature was identified around the article's core concepts and topical concerns through this purposive, concept-driven approach. The identification process was not documented through a formal predefined database-search log; accordingly, database-specific routes, search strings, search dates, result counts, and screening totals are not reported. Peer-reviewed journal literature published between 2022 and 2026 was prioritized to represent current scholarly discussion, particularly research addressing gender equality in education, capability-oriented educational analysis, women's agency in Indonesia, lifelong and non-formal learning, and post-education opportunities. Sources were retained when they contributed directly to the conceptual argument and their bibliographic identities and relevance to the claims concerned could be verified. The sources cited in the manuscript constitute the literature ultimately used in constructing the conceptual argument and should not be understood as the outcome of a formal systematic screening process.

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the literature was mapped according to how equality was framed in relation to access, participation, completion, lifelong learning, empowerment, capability, and agency. Second, the distinction between functionings and capabilities was used to separate achieved outcomes from substantive opportunities preceding those outcomes. Third, empirical and conceptual studies were compared to identify personal, social, economic, relational, and institutional conditions that affect the conversion of educational resources into opportunities. Fourth, these strands were synthesized into the proposed concept of "education as expanding the horizon of choice." These stages describe the conceptual analysis and synthesis undertaken in the article; they do not constitute a systematic literature-screening protocol. The construction is analytical rather than a validated quantitative index and does not prescribe a preferred post-education outcome.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 When Equality Stops at the Door of Education

Equal access is a necessary foundation of educational justice, but it is not a sufficient endpoint. Women's presence in educational institutions and successful completion of study demonstrate important achievements; they do not by themselves establish whether educational resources can be converted into substantive freedoms. Unterhalter et al. (2022) make this distinction visible by questioning measures that privilege observable outcomes while inadequately capturing the conditions through which gendered opportunities are formed.

Desmond et al. (2024) provide a life-course reason for extending the analysis. Their findings indicate that favorable schooling indicators for girls can coexist with disadvantages for women later in life. Schooling and its later use are therefore analytically distinct. This does not diminish the importance of access and completion; it means that educational equality should also attend to conditions affecting whether human potential can be used after schooling.

The capability approach sharpens the distinction because it separates resources, capabilities, and functionings. Educational completion is an important functioning, but it does not exhaust the meaning of educational equality. MacKenzie and Chiang (2023) show that agency in education is shaped by structural constraints, while Diwakar (2023) emphasizes intersecting factors that can constrain the exercise of freedom. Moving beyond access therefore lengthens the evaluative horizon from entry and completion toward the substantive use of education.

3.2 After Graduation, Whose Choice?

Educational resources enter a wider social world after graduation. Knowledge, credentials, skills, confidence, and networks interact with economic circumstances, family responsibilities, institutional arrangements, and gendered expectations. Such conditions matter not because every social norm is inherently discriminatory, but because they may influence which paths are considered realistic, legitimate, or appropriate for women and men.

This argument requires avoiding a simplistic opposition between "traditional" and "modern" lives. Marriage after graduation does not itself demonstrate constrained agency, just as entering paid work does not automatically demonstrate substantive freedom. Aisyah (2022) illustrates this complexity among young Indonesian Muslim women: higher education, lifelong learning, career, religious commitments, and full-time motherhood can all enter women's deliberations. The analytical focus should therefore shift from the visible outcome to the substantive alternatives preceding it.

Consider two women who both decide to focus on family life after completing education. One may have realistic opportunities for further study, employment, entrepreneurship, or family-centered life and deliberately prefer the latter. Another may arrive at the same functioning when other paths were never realistically available. The observable result is similar, but the substantive freedom preceding it is not necessarily equivalent. The same reasoning applies to employment: working may express agency, but it may also reflect economic necessity and a narrow set of alternatives.

The question "after graduation, whose choice?" is therefore not an accusation against families, parents, men, marriage, or cultural traditions. Human decisions are relational. Advice, affection, responsibility, economic conditions, and family dialogue legitimately shape choices. Research on women's agency in Indonesia also shows that negotiation and participation can coexist with structural constraints (Listiani et al., 2025). The substantive concern is whether a woman remains a participant in deliberation or whether gender predetermines the only acceptable outcome.

A perspective of mutuality is important here. Expanding women's choices should not be understood as narrowing men's choices or dissolving family responsibility. Women and men can both have aspirations, care responsibilities, and obligations to negotiate shared lives. Equality concerns meaningful participation in those negotiations, not the elimination of relationships.

3.3 Education, Capability, and Women's Agency

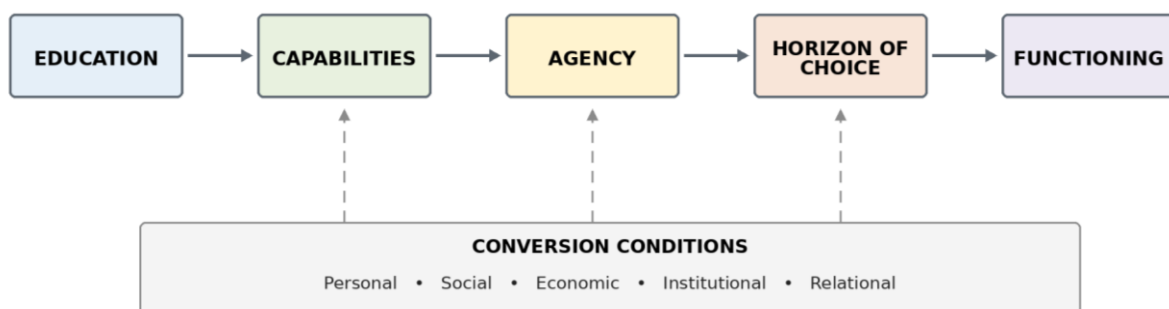
The capability approach offers a way to assess educational benefit without deciding in advance which life women ought to lead. Chen et al. (2024) show that the approach is already established in empirical women's studies. Its usefulness for the present argument lies precisely in refusing to reduce well-being to possession of resources or achievement of a single outcome.

Capability concerns the substantive opportunities a person has, whereas agency concerns the freedom to pursue valued goals and participate meaningfully in decisions (Sen, 1985). The concepts are related but not identical. A broad opportunity set without meaningful voice may leave agency weak; strong expression of preferences may have limited practical significance when realistic alternatives are extremely narrow.

Education can contribute to knowledge, critical reflection, communication, skills, confidence, and the capacity to imagine alternatives. Yet education does not operate in a social vacuum. Andang (2026) synthesizes Indonesian research showing the continuing importance of sociocultural norms, economic inequality, gender bias, and institutional conditions. Educational resources therefore need to be understood together with the conditions that shape their conversion into opportunities.

This framework also prevents women from being represented simply as passive victims. Structural constraints matter, but agency may be exercised within and through social relations. Equally, acknowledging agency should not erase structural constraints. Relational approaches to autonomy emphasize that persons and their agency are socially embedded rather than constituted outside relationships (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). A person can therefore make meaningful decisions within relationships while facing conditions that make some alternatives substantially more difficult than others.

The resulting conceptual sequence is: education develops resources and reflective capacities; these interact with personal, social, economic, institutional, and relational conditions; the interaction shapes a capability set; agency operates within that set through deliberation, negotiation, and decision; the horizon of choice draws attention to the breadth and meaningful navigability of the alternatives under consideration; and the chosen outcome becomes a functioning. Figure 1 summarizes this proposed analytical sequence and presents personal, social, economic, institutional, and relational conditions as contextual influences on the conversion of educational resources into substantive opportunities and on the deliberation through which those opportunities are navigated. This is an analytical framework, not an empirically established linear causal chain. Educational equality cannot therefore be inferred from functioning alone.



Contextual influences on conversion and deliberation; not one-to-one mappings or an empirically established causal model

Figure 1. Proposed conceptual and analytical framework linking education, capabilities, agency, the horizon of choice, and functioning. Conversion conditions are represented as contextual influences rather than one-to-one mappings; the arrows indicate analytical relationships, not an empirically established linear causal sequence.

3.4 From Equal Access to Equal Educational Benefit

If access asks whether women can enter education, equality of educational benefit asks what becomes substantively possible because of education. This does not replace access, continuity, quality, or completion. Rather, it treats them as stages in a longer evaluative chain. Educational achievement is incomplete as an account of equality when capabilities developed through education cannot be meaningfully used.

The relevance of this point is visible in lifelong and non-formal education. Kalenda et al. (2024) find gender differences across types of adult education and training even where aggregate participation may appear similar. Alam et al. (2024) likewise show the importance of lifelong learning and skills development for career planning and gender equality. Participation alone can therefore conceal differences in the kinds of learning opportunities and subsequent pathways available.

Educational benefit should not be reduced to income, employment, occupational status, or further degrees. Such outcomes can be important, but they cannot serve as universal measures of empowerment. Education may be used in paid work, entrepreneurship, family life, community participation, caregiving, further learning, civic activity, or combinations of these. The value of education lies partly in making participation more reflective and in widening substantive possibilities.

Recognizing diverse educational benefits must not become a justification for narrowing alternatives. Saying that education has value in family life is different from saying that family life should be the only legitimate destination for educated women. The first recognizes the value of a functioning; the second restricts the capability set. This distinction is central to the argument. Accordingly, success at an earlier educational stage does not by itself establish substantive equality at a later stage.

3.5 Education as Expanding the Horizon of Choice

On the basis of the preceding synthesis, this article proposes the “horizon of choice” as an evaluative dimension of women’s educational equality. The term is used here as the author’s conceptual synthesis, not as an established measurement scale. It refers to the range of life paths that a person can recognize as legitimate possibilities, meaningfully deliberate upon, and realistically pursue after education. It concerns neither an unlimited number of options nor abstract permission; it concerns substantive alternatives.

The four dimensions are derived from distinct but connected strands of literature rather than from a single prior model. Recognizability is informed by work showing that gender equality in education cannot be reduced to parity and should be examined through institutions, relationships, and discourses (Unterhalter et al., 2022); its formulation as whether post-education paths are intelligible as legitimate possibilities for oneself is the author’s synthesis. Substantive availability is grounded in Sen’s distinction between achieved functionings and substantive freedom or capability (Sen, 1985) and in capability-oriented educational work showing how structural constraints can jeopardize agency (MacKenzie & Chiang, 2023); its formulation as the realistic pursuability of a post-education path is the author’s synthesis. Deliberative agency builds on agency as the freedom to pursue valued goals (Sen, 1985), Aisyah’s (2022) examination of choices around higher education, career, and full-time motherhood, and Listiani et al.’s (2025) account of negotiation and participation under structural constraints. Relational respect draws on relational accounts that understand autonomy and agency as socially embedded rather than atomistic (MacKenzie & Stoljar, 2000), while its use here to evaluate whether a person’s voice and standing are preserved in post-education deliberation is the author’s synthesis.

Accordingly, recognizability asks whether different life paths can be imagined as legitimate possibilities available to oneself. Substantive availability asks whether an option is not merely formally permitted but sufficiently supported to be realistically pursued. Deliberative agency concerns the person’s room to weigh values, consequences, aspirations, and responsibilities. Relational respect concerns whether deliberation within family and social relationships preserves the person’s standing and voice. Their combination as an evaluative framework for post-education choice is the specific analytical

synthesis proposed in this article; it requires empirical testing and refinement. Table 1 summarizes the theoretical grounding, article-specific synthesis, and claim boundary of each dimension.

These elements distinguish expansion of choice from individualism. No person chooses outside social relations, responsibilities, or material limits. The relevant question is whether those conditions become disproportionately restrictive because of gender. Dialogue with parents or a spouse may be compatible with agency; a situation in which gender alone closes alternatives raises a different equality concern.

The framework likewise rejects a hierarchy of “empowered” outcomes. A woman who continues to postgraduate study is not automatically more empowered than a woman who marries; a woman in paid employment is not automatically more agentic than a woman who centers family life. The reverse is also true. What matters analytically is the substantive opportunity set and the quality of deliberation preceding the functioning.

Accordingly, education as expanding the horizon of choice means that education should strengthen a person’s capacity to understand alternatives, assess consequences, develop aspirations, negotiate relationships, and make responsible decisions. Education should widen choice rather than determine what must be chosen. The question is not whether women follow a supposedly modern, economically productive, or independent life, but whether education contributes to making a wider range of meaningful lives genuinely possible.

This formulation also preserves mutuality. Expanding women’s horizons is not a project of restricting men’s lives or treating family as an obstacle. Rather, education can support women and men in developing capacities for dialogue, shared responsibility, lifelong learning, and reflective decision-making. Equality does not require identical lives; it requires that gender should not prematurely close the horizon of what a person can meaningfully consider and pursue.

Table 1. Theoretical grounding and analytical status of the horizon-of-choice dimensions

Dimension	Theoretical grounding	Article-specific synthesis	Claim boundary
Recognizability	Gender equality in education cannot be reduced to parity and should be examined through institutions, relationships, and discourses (Unterhalter et al., 2022).	Whether diverse post-education paths are intelligible as legitimate possibilities for oneself.	Proposed analytical dimension; not an established scale.
Substantive availability	Sen (1985) distinguishes achieved functionings from substantive freedom or capability; MacKenzie and Chiang (2023) show how structural constraints can jeopardize agency in education.	Whether a path is realistically pursuable with sufficient personal, social, economic, and institutional support.	Conceptually grounded; empirical indicators remain to be developed.
Deliberative agency	Agency concerns freedom to pursue valued goals (Sen, 1985); Aisyah (2022) examines choices around higher education, career, and full-time motherhood, while Listiani et al. (2025) document negotiation and participation under structural constraints.	Whether the person has meaningful room to weigh aspirations, values, consequences, and responsibilities.	Does not require unlimited individual independence.
Relational respect	Relational accounts treat autonomy and agency as socially embedded rather than atomistic (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000).	Whether deliberation within relationships preserves the person’s voice and standing.	Does not treat family or relationships as inherently restrictive.

4. CONCLUSION

Substantive educational equality for women requires more than access to and completion of education; it also requires attention to whether educational resources become usable capabilities and expand the meaningful life paths that women can recognize, consider, and realistically pursue. The article's specific theoretical contribution is to position the breadth of meaningful post-education life choices—the horizon of choice—as an explicit evaluative dimension of substantive educational equality while distinguishing it from capability as substantive opportunity and agency as the pursuit of valued goals. Its four dimensions—recognizability, substantive availability, deliberative agency, and relational respect—are analytical propositions developed through conceptual synthesis, not validated indicators. Future empirical research may test and refine them by examining whether learners recognize diverse paths, possess the material and institutional conditions to pursue them, participate meaningfully in deliberation, and retain voice and standing within relevant relationships. Such inquiry may be adapted to formal education, non-formal education, and lifelong-learning settings without presuming that employment, further study, marriage, family life, entrepreneurship, or any combination constitutes the universally preferred outcome. Education should expand women's choices rather than prescribe what they must choose.

AI USAGE STATEMENT

During the preparation and revision of this work, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) as an assistive tool for language refinement, structural organization, and critical discussion of the manuscript, including testing conceptual distinctions and preparing responses to reviewer comments. All arguments, conceptual decisions, interpretation of the literature, source selection and verification, revisions, and the final text were critically reviewed and determined by the author. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, integrity, and content of this publication.

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