



Article

Women's Higher Education in Rural Areas: Family Perceptions, Socio-Cultural and Economic Barriers, and Access Support

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Abstract

Higher education is a vital instrument for women's empowerment and independence; however, access for rural women remains constrained by complex structural and cultural barriers. This study aims to analyze how the community of Tamansari Village, Banyuwangi, perceives the importance of higher education for women; examine the interplay among social norms, economic limitations, and family backgrounds in shaping educational aspirations and access opportunities; and evaluate the role of scholarship support as an enabling factor. Employing a



descriptive qualitative approach, data were gathered through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation involving parents, rural women, and community figures. The findings reveal an ambivalent community perception. On the one hand, a positive perspective views educated women as the primary educators (madrasah utama) within the family and agents of economic self-reliance. On the other hand, skepticism persists due to patriarchal norms, gender-biased family resource allocation, and the perceived high cost of higher education. Nevertheless, low parental educational attainment does not dampen aspirations but rather acts as a catalyst for intergenerational mobility. The availability of scholarships serves as a critical game-changer that not only alleviates financial burdens but also actively reconstructs collective social norms. This study concludes that targeted financial interventions combined with familial support can effectively bridge the gap between educational aspirations and actual access for women in rural communities.

Keyword

Community perception, higher education, women, Tamansari Village, educational equality

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui dan mengidentifikasi konstruksi fikih kebhinnekaan pada pembelajaran PAI di Universitas Brawijaya. Selain itu, penelitian ini juga bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi dan menganalisis formulasi fikih kebhinnekaan pada pembelajaran PAI dalam menumbuhkan sikap harmoni di tengah varian madzhab fikih mahasiswa. Pendekatan yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah pendekatan studi kasus dengan menjadikan observasi partisipan, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi sebagai basis teknik pengumpulan datanya. Temuan penelitian ini adalah: Pertama, Dalam konstruksi Dosen PAI, kebhinnekaan fikih merupakan keniscayaan universal yang harus disikapi secara toleran, sehingga pendidikan damai melalui mata kuliah PAI dapat terimplementasi dengan baik. Kedua, formulasi pendidikan fikih kebhinnekaan melalui pembelajaran PAI di Universitas Brawijaya terlihat pada desain kurikulum yang tidak memuat unsur SARA di dalamnya. Desain kurikulum fikih kebhinnekaan didasarkan pada nilai-nilai universalitas ajaran Islam seperti spririt keadilan, kebebasan, kemanusiaan, egalitarianisme, perdamaian, persaudaraan, dan kasih-sayang. Melalui formulasi nilai-nilai tersebut, pendidikan damai di Universitas Brawijaya dapat tersemai dengan baik. Selain desain kurikulum, formulasi pendidikan fikih kebhinnekaan juga diekspresikan dalam bentuk materi-materi yang ada dalam buku Daras PAI. Formulasi fikih kebhinnekaan juga terekspresi dalam bentuk evaluasi pembelajaran PAI di Universitas Brawijaya yang tidak mengedepankan ego sektarian. Evaluasi pembelajaran PAI tersebut diorientasikan untuk melampaui sekat-sekat primordialitas ormas dan organisasi ekstra kampus.

Kata Kunci

Akses pendidikan, kesetaraan pendidikan, persepsi masyarakat, perempuan, perguruan tinggi, Desa Tamansari

INTRODUCTION

Higher education represents a crucial stage in developing individual capacity, expanding employment opportunities, and improving quality of life, particularly for women to broaden their independence, socio-economic participation, and intergenerational caregiving. Although equal educational rights between men and women have been

normatively recognized—as emphasized by Asghar Ali Engineer, who states that women possess equal social, economic, and educational rights (Engineer, 2008; Nuryatno, 2007)—the availability of these opportunities does not guarantee equal access at the grassroots level (Handayani, 2018; MPRRI, 2025). This disparity at the grassroots level is vividly reflected in the National Socio-Economic Survey (Susenas) data from BPS (2022), which records a sharp divide between rural and urban areas: rural women's participation in higher education reaches only 6.00% (compared to 13.97% in urban areas), with the majority having only completed elementary school (31.28%), and illiteracy rates still touching 7.35% (Lisnasari, 2023). A woman's decision to pursue higher education is not determined solely by the availability of formal educational institutions, but directly confronts social structures, local community views, and family calculations (Firdaus, 2025). Consequently, a fundamental gap emerges between women's educational aspirations and the attainable reality of access.

The tension between aspirations and access is heavily influenced by the pressure of traditional gender norms and family economic constraints. On the one hand, communities often occupy an ambivalent stance: recognizing the value-based benefits of higher education, yet continuing to prioritize domestic roles, marriage, and caregiving for women. A deeply rooted patriarchal culture confines women to the domestic sphere, rendering higher education investment for women frequently perceived as less urgent (Halizah & Faralita, 2023). On the other hand, financial barriers further restrict this maneuverability. Higher education requires significant costs—encompassing tuition fees, transportation, and living expenses—which, for low-income families, are often perceived as a burden rather than a long-term investment. These economic limitations directly heighten the risk of educational disruption and constrain family decisions when prioritizing female children (Ziana, Aminuyati, & Khosmas, 2019).

Nevertheless, rural communities are not static entities; agency, family background dynamics, and enabling factors exist that can redefine these perceptions. Parental educational background, for instance, does not always exert a linear influence (Yunani, Roni, & Supatmi, 2022). Field realities demonstrate that parents with low formal education often harbor high aspirations, aiming to prevent their children from experiencing the same economic constraints. Furthermore, external support in the form of scholarship programs has proven to be a significant catalyst for change. Dulkiah et al. (2023) highlight that scholarships not only reduce the financial burden on impoverished families but also build social confidence that higher education is attainable. This dynamic is clearly visible in Tamansari Village, Licin District, Banyuwangi Regency—a tourism-based rural area that still exhibits a gap in female higher education participation (only 18% compared to 82% for males), yet simultaneously demonstrates a shift toward positive perceptions driven by scholarship access and an increasing awareness of women's independence.

Previous studies have addressed women's education from various perspectives, including gender norms, family economic conditions, parental educational background, and scholarship support (Normala & Zulaikha, 2025; Sadriani & Arifin, 2025). However, these factors are often examined in isolation. Meanwhile, research on community perceptions tends to categorize public views into rigid positive and negative dichotomies without linking them more deeply to the processes of aspiration formation and access opportunities (Annisa, Bariah, & Sitika, 2022; Kurniawati & Hayati, 2025; Rahmayani, 2021). These limitations

underscore the need for a study that connects community perceptions, socio-economic conditions, family norms, and educational support to understand how women in rural communities construct aspirations to pursue higher education and the extent to which these aspirations can be realized into actual access. In this context, Tamansari Village provides an empirical setting to examine the relationship between recognizing the importance of higher education for women and the various conditions that enable or restrict the realization of those aspirations. This study aims to: (1) analyze how the community perceives the importance of higher education for women; (2) analyze how social norms, economic conditions, and family backgrounds relate to the formation of aspirations and access opportunities for women's higher education; and (3) analyze the role of educational support, particularly scholarships, in mitigating barriers and expanding opportunities for women to pursue higher education.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013) to deeply explore the meanings, aspirations, barriers, and support regarding women's higher education in rural areas. The research focus encompasses four main aspects: (1) community perceptions of women's higher education, (2) the process of forming educational aspirations and decisions, (3) socio-economic and cultural barriers, and (4) the role of educational support (particularly scholarships) as an enabling factor.

The research was conducted in Tamansari Village, Licin District, Banyuwangi Regency. This site was selected purposively due to its relevant sociological dynamics—marked by the contrast between economic-tourism development, the persistence of strong domestic gender norms, and the potential shift in perceptions through access to scholarships. Informants were selected through purposive sampling to include parents, rural women (both those pursuing and not pursuing higher education), and community leaders/members who understand the local social landscape of education.

Data were collected through three primary techniques: (1) in-depth interviews to examine experiences, norms, and family decision-making dynamics; (2) observation to observe the socio-community context; and (3) documentation of supporting data regarding village profiles and educational conditions.

Data analysis followed the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana through the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2013). The coding process was developed thematically to abstract field data into conceptual categories (e.g., categorizing narratives on cost under economic barriers, and narratives on migrating/domestic roles under gender norms). Data trustworthiness was maintained through source triangulation (comparing perspectives across different informant groups) and technique triangulation (cross-referencing interview results, observations, and documentation) to ensure the credibility and depth of the research findings (Sugiyono, 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ambivalence in the Meaning of Higher Education for Rural Women: Between Aspirations for Change and Social Hesitation

The perception of the Tamansari Village community regarding higher education for

women demonstrates an ambivalent condition, oscillating between aspirations for change and hesitations rooted in traditional social constructs. The findings indicate that the community does not view the importance of higher education through a single lens; rather, it is divided into two interrelated orientations: positive perceptions that position higher education as a means of empowerment, and negative perceptions bound by social anxieties and patriarchal views. Positive perceptions stem from community awareness of women's strategic roles within the family and social environment.

A section of the community views higher education as a vital instrument to enhance self-quality, economic independence, and women's capacity in nurturing future generations. Within the domestic sphere, educated women are perceived as the primary educators (*madrasah utama*)—the first and foremost teachers for their children who are responsible for shaping the character, morals, and mindset of the next generation. Higher education for women functions as a tool for social reconstruction; educating women equates to reforming the overall mentality, attitudes, and perspectives of the broader community (Multazami, Ramadhani, & Thobroni, 2025; Siregar, Pohan, & Nasution, 2025). Furthermore, higher education is seen as a gateway to social mobility and economic self-reliance, where educated women are considered to possess better capacity to work, participate in community activities, and support the family economy. This perspective aligns with Modernization Theory, which positions formal education as a vehicle for transforming lifestyles toward greater well-being (Yuliawati, Asnamawati, Herawati, Resti, & Nurmalia, 2023). On the other hand, community hesitation—reflected in negative perceptions—originates from traditional cultural values that continue to confine women to the domestic sphere. Some community members argue that higher education for women is less relevant because women will ultimately return to domestic roles, managing households, caring for husbands, and attending to domestic chores. The dominance of patriarchal values shapes the mindset that high educational investments are more appropriately prioritized for men, who are positioned as the primary economic breadwinners.

This social construction is reinforced by Social Norm Theory, which explains how traditional gender norms restrict women's mobility and social reproductive rights (Binasdevi, 2021). Consequently, rather than planning for higher education, pressure emerges for young women to enter the workforce early to provide short-term financial assistance or to marry early to reduce the family's economic burden. This hesitation is further exacerbated by parental anxieties regarding external influences and social environments when women must migrate (*merantau*) to pursue their studies. The tension between aspirations and hesitations reveals that acknowledging the value of higher education does not automatically translate into tangible support for women's access. While the Tamansari community generally acknowledges education as something good and valuable, when confronted with gender role calculations and resource constraints, higher education for women often shifts from a primary priority to a questionable choice. Understanding this nuanced perception serves as an important foundation for unraveling how socio-economic barriers and family norms subsequently operate to restrict or enable access to higher education for rural women.

Gender Norms and Family Support in Educational Decisions

Alongside growing aspirations, community perceptions in Tamansari Village are also

marked by hesitations deeply rooted in traditional cultural values. A segment of the community maintains that women will ultimately return to the domestic domain, rendering higher education less relevant to their future. This view is frequently accompanied by the assumption that women should immediately work to assist the family economy or marry early; thus, pursuing higher education is perceived as a waste of time. Such a perspective indicates that public perceptions remain shaped by a patriarchal social construction that designates men as the primary breadwinners while identifying women exclusively with domestic roles. The dominance of these patriarchal values in turn forms a collective mindset that educational investment should be prioritized for men, as they are expected to shoulder future family economic responsibilities. This stance aligns with social norms explaining how patriarchal systems constrain women's educational opportunities (Binasdevi, 2021; Firdaus, 2025).

Within this normative framework, women are seen as not requiring higher education given that their expected roles primarily pertain to household duties, child-rearing, and supporting husbands. As a result, educational opportunities for women are frequently narrowed, not due to a lack of academic capability, but because of deeply entrenched social and religious interpretations within the community. These gender norms do not operate in isolation; they are closely intertwined with family anxieties regarding environments outside the village. Many parents experience anxiety if their daughters must migrate to pursue higher education, fearing exposure to unmonitored social behavior, unsafe environments, or foreign cultural values that diverge significantly from family principles. Such apprehensions frequently serve as justifications for parents to restrict their daughters' education, either by selecting local institutions close to home or by halting education after a certain level. Consequently, family support for women's education is determined not merely by agreeing on the abstract importance of education, but also by the extent to which families feel safe releasing their daughters beyond familiar surroundings. Ultimately, the pressure of gender norms and family anxieties generates broader social pressures at the community level. Women who persistently strive to pursue higher education often face social stigma, such as being perceived as disobedient to tradition or deviating from the "ideal" role expected of rural women. Pressure from extended families and surrounding community members further reinforces these barriers, resulting in lower higher education participation rates among women compared to men. This pattern demonstrates that gender norms in Tamansari Village operate on two distinct layers: the nuclear family layer, which weighs safety and propriety, and the community layer, which monitors compliance with prescribed gender roles.

Economic Constraints and Perceptions of Educational Affordability

Family economic status represents one of the most dominant structural barriers shaping the perceptions of the Tamansari Village community regarding the affordability of higher education for women. In rural areas, investing in higher education is frequently viewed as a heavy and high-risk financial decision for low- or unstable-income families. For the majority of local residents, financing college is not merely limited to single tuition fees (UKT), but encompasses a complex package of financial burdens, including transportation, housing/accommodation, learning supplies, and daily living expenses throughout the course of study. The substantial accumulation of these expenses fosters a collective perception that higher education is a "hard-to-reach" luxury and an unrealistic pursuit for rural youth,

particularly young women. This finding aligns with the analysis of Ziana et al. (2017), who emphasize that low economic status is a primary determinant increasing vulnerability to school dropout and constraining the continuity of children's education to higher levels.

These financial constraints ultimately generate an imbalanced household economic calculation between short-term needs and long-term investments. When family income allocation must be prioritized for fulfilling daily basic necessities, attending college for three to four years is often perceived as a deferral of the child's economic contribution. In this context, strong pressures emerge from both the family and the surrounding community for young women to immediately enter the workforce upon completing secondary education in order to help support the household economy. Additionally, options such as "early marriage" are frequently viewed as a pragmatic and rational strategy for impoverished families to "alleviate financial burdens and parental dependencies". Consequently, economic limitations not only constrain a family's purchasing power regarding educational services, but also construct a perspective that degrades the urgency of women's higher education into a mere optional choice under the pressure of more pressing life necessities.

This economic barrier appears even more disproportionate when linked to gender bias in allocating limited family resources. When an impoverished family must choose which child to prioritize for college, patriarchal norms interact with economic calculations: sons tend to be prioritized because they are viewed as prospective heads of household and the main financial anchors for the future. Conversely, expenditure on women's higher education is often perceived as a "sunk cost" due to the assumption that women will eventually follow their husbands and manage domestic duties. The intersection between economic constraints and gender bias serves as the primary explanation for why higher education attainment among rural women nationally remains very low (Firdaus, 2025; Handayani, 2018; MPRRI, 2025) and why female higher education participation in Tamansari Village lags far behind at 18% compared to males at 82%. Therefore, this perception of unaffordability is not simply a matter of a lack of funds, but rather a reflection of structural-economic barriers that perpetuate inequalities in educational access for rural women.

Parental Education and Intergenerational Educational Aspirations

Parental educational background plays a crucial role in shaping their perspectives on the urgency of higher education for their children. In Tamansari Village, the majority of parents completed education only up to the elementary level, resulting in relatively limited academic understanding of formal education. Nevertheless, this limitation does not automatically hinder them from demonstrating support for their children's educational continuation. This support stems not from academic knowledge, but from life experiences that have taught them that education is a pathway toward better opportunities.

Many parents realize that their own low levels of education have been a barrier to improving their standard of living and family welfare. Experiences of working with limited choices and unstable incomes drive them to view higher education as an opportunity for their children to achieve a more secure life. This awareness, born out of structural experiences, becomes the primary motivation for parents to encourage their children—including daughters—to pursue higher education.

This finding presents an interesting contrast to the study by Yunani (2022), which

posits that parental education levels significantly affect children's learning motivation—the higher the parents' education, the greater their understanding and support for their children's education, whereas lower-educated parents tend to be less capable of providing learning motivation due to limited knowledge and experience. The pattern observed in Tamansari Village demonstrates a different dynamic: parents with low levels of education maintain a positive perception of the importance of higher education for their daughters. Rather than arising from academic experience, this support grows out of everyday life realities that directly demonstrate how low educational attainment correlates with restricted employment options and lower income.

This divergence indicates that parental support for education is not solely determined by the formal level of education they attained, but is also shaped by lived experiences, directly felt economic pressures, and aspirations for their children's future. In other words, intergenerational educational aspirations in Tamansari Village are not transmitted through parental formal educational capital, but through reflection upon their own lived limitations—a form of experiential learning passed down as hope to the next generation, including daughters.

Scholarships as Educational Support and Access Barrier Reducers

Amidst the economic constraints, gender norms, and family anxieties detailed previously, scholarships emerge as one of the most tangible forms of educational support in altering the Tamansari Village community's perception of the importance of higher education for women. By providing financial assistance covering tuition fees, learning supplies, and other supporting necessities, scholarships successfully alleviate family anxieties that previously framed higher education as an expensive and unachievable pursuit—a perception addressed in the earlier section on economic limitations. This cost relief not only encourages families to extend greater support, but also instills confidence that women possess equal opportunities and capabilities to excel at the higher education level.

This finding aligns with research by Dulkiah et al. (2023), which asserts that scholarship programs exert a significant positive impact on supporting educational access for high-achieving students from low-income families. The effectiveness of scholarship programs is demonstrated by the financial relief felt in fulfilling educational needs, expanding higher education accessibility, and simultaneously strengthening public trust in the government's commitment to supporting education. In the context of Tamansari Village, the success of female scholarship recipients serves as a concrete example that transforms the community mindset, proving that women are capable of competing academically and contributing through education.

This impact intensifies as the community witnesses that women pursuing higher education gain broader employment opportunities, enhanced economic potential, and the ability to elevate their family's quality of life. At the same time, scholarships bolster women's self-confidence and internal motivation, as they feel valued, recognized for their potential, and backed by concrete support to attain higher aspirations. Through scholarship programs and their accompanying outreach efforts, the community is introduced to the value of gender equality in education. Consequently, traditional views restricting women's roles—as outlined in the gender norms section—gradually shift toward an understanding that higher education

is a crucial long-term investment for women.

Thus, scholarships function not merely as financial aid reducing cost burdens, but also operate as a social mechanism accelerating shifts in collective perception. While economic barriers and gender norms previously created a divide between women's aspirations and actual access to higher education, scholarships bridge this gap—transforming what was once viewed as a structural barrier into an attainable opportunity, while embedding a new conviction that women possess equal rights, capacity, and opportunities to pursue higher education.

Ambivalence in the Meaning of Higher Education for Women: Synthesis of Findings and Educational Implications

The findings of this study reveal a coherent narrative of how higher education aspirations for women in Tamansari Village confront a series of obstacles before ultimately forging a pathway toward actual access. Initially, as outlined in the preceding sections, the community exhibits a divided perception of women's higher education—oscillating between viewing it as a vehicle for empowerment and questioning its practical relevance. This skepticism is subsequently reinforced by two coinciding restrictive forces: gender norms and familial anxieties that confine women to the domestic sphere and restrict their mobility beyond familiar environments, alongside economic limitations that frame higher education as an unattainable financial burden. A similar pattern is observed in rural contexts within other developing nations, where deeply entrenched gender norms consistently restrict women's agency in making independent decisions regarding their education and future (Chandramohan et al., 2023). These dual barriers reinforce one another, putting early-stage aspirations at risk of stagnating before translating into actual access.

Nevertheless, the trajectory of these findings demonstrates that such barriers are not absolute. Low parental education, which theoretically is expected to hinder support (Yunani, 2022), unexpectedly functions as a distinct source of encouragement within Tamansari Village—parents who personally experienced life limitations due to low education are driven to ensure their daughters do not face similar constraints. This pattern aligns with evidence that parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds consistently maintain high expectations for their children's higher education, regardless of their own socioeconomic status or formal educational attainment, demonstrating that support for a child's education does not rely solely on parental academic capital (Wang, Cheatham-Hemphill, & Harrington, 2025). The support emerging from lived experience is further reinforced at a structural level by scholarship programs, which eliminate economic hurdles while loosening traditional gender norms through the tangible success of female scholarship recipients. This finding is consistent with evidence from community-based intervention programs in other rural settings, indicating that structured initiatives can effectively drive shifts in social norms that previously restricted opportunities for young women (Kohli et al., 2021). Consequently, the gap between aspirations and access in Tamansari Village is bridged by two complementary forms of educational support: lived-experience-driven family encouragement and policy-driven scholarship interventions.

This trajectory aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework referenced in the introduction (Salsabila, 2018). Gender norms and family support operate at the micro- and

mesosystem levels—the domain of the family and a woman's immediate relationships—while economic limitations reflect pressures at this level that are exacerbated by broader structural conditions. Conversely, scholarships function at the exosystem level as policy measures originating outside a woman's immediate environment, yet they successfully penetrate and alter micro-level dynamics—demonstrating that policy-level interventions can serve as effective levers to shift deeply rooted norms within the family and community (macrosystem).

In practical terms, these findings hold key implications for formulating educational policies in rural areas sharing similar characteristics with Tamansari Village. First, scholarship programs must be continually strengthened not merely as financial aid, but as instruments for social change—for instance, through outreach initiatives engaging families and community leaders rather than targeting prospective recipients alone, given that the success of such programs in other contexts heavily depends on broad community involvement beyond individual beneficiaries (Kuteesa, Akpuokwe, & Udeh, 2024; Nengyanti et al., 2025). Second, given that parental support can flourish from lived experiences despite limited formal education, parental capacity-building initiatives—such as cross-family experience-sharing forums—hold the potential to bolster this support without waiting for increases in formal parental education levels. Third, familial anxieties regarding external environments underscore the necessity of mentorship or safety guarantees for women migrating to pursue higher education, serving as a strategic measure to reduce gender-norm-based barriers. Additional findings also indicate that the mere availability of scholarship programs is insufficient if uncompensated by efforts to raise awareness among rural communities, as a lack of information frequently acts as a distinct barrier limiting program impact (K & Chotai, 2025).

This study is not without limitations. The research scope, confined to a single village, precludes broad generalization to other rural contexts that may possess distinct socio-cultural dynamics. Furthermore, because this study positions community perception as the primary data source, women's aspirations are captured largely through community interpretations rather than directly through the autonomous voices of young women themselves. Future research positioning young women as primary informants will afford a deeper understanding of how these aspirations are personally experienced and articulated, thereby complementing the empirical framework established by this study.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the community of Tamansari Village perceives the importance of higher education for women in an ambivalent manner, where positive views regarding education as a means of self-improvement, economic independence, and nurturing future generations (*madrasah utama*) coexist with hesitations driven by patriarchal mindsets and domestic role constraints. This nuanced perception demonstrates that the formation of aspirations and access opportunities for women's higher education is deeply influenced by the interplay among social norms, family economic conditions, and parental backgrounds. Financial constraints and anxieties regarding social conduct frequently suppress these aspirations, prompting a preference for short-term employment or early marriage. However, low parental educational attainment does not automatically dampen aspirations; rather, it

acts as a catalyst for intergenerational motivation, driving parents to ensure a better quality of life for their daughters. In this context, educational support—particularly scholarships—serves as a vital enabling factor that not only significantly alleviates family financial burdens, but also effectively reconstructs public perception and erodes the dominance of patriarchal norms. Overall, the presence of scholarships alongside familial motivation successfully bridges the gap between educational aspirations and actual access, transforming higher education opportunities for rural women from mere hope into an achievable reality.

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