



The barriers and enablers to education among scheduled caste and scheduled tribe adolescent girls in northern Karnataka, South India: A qualitative study



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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the barriers and enablers to scheduled caste/scheduled tribe (SC/ST) adolescent girls entering into, and completing secondary education in northern Karnataka, South India. In-depth interviews were conducted with 22 adolescent girls, their respective parent/guardian (n = 22) and 11 teachers, recruited purposively from 11 villages within two districts in northern Karnataka. Multiple barriers were identified to disadvantaged caste adolescent girls' entry into and retention in education in this setting, and these operated at the individual, family, community and school levels. In addition, some enablers to education were also described. The study highlights the importance of involving multiple stakeholders to overcome the barriers to education for SC/ST girls, and of working to change beliefs and expectations around gender norms as well as improving the quality of education in this setting.

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1. Introduction

Increasing participation of girls in schooling is widely acknowledged to be beneficial to individuals and societies. It is also a social justice issue. However, in some countries, girls remain disadvantaged in terms of access to school and experiences of it, and are likely to leave school earlier than boys. Where girls are additionally disadvantaged, for example by their social or economic status, they are further marginalized. The post-2015 era is characterised by a new focus on retention into and through

secondary education, to build on successes in achieving gender 'parity' in primary school in many countries.

In order to begin to address the issue of participation, what is needed is a fuller understanding of what helps or hinders girls from attending and staying in secondary school. This article reports a qualitative study, which explored the barriers and enablers to scheduled caste/scheduled tribe (SC/ST)¹ adolescent girls entering into, and completing secondary education in two districts in northern Karnataka, South India. Interviews with 22 adolescent girls, their respective parent/guardian and 11 teachers from 11 villages within two districts in northern Karnataka, explored the multiple barriers to disadvantaged caste adolescent girls' entry into and retention in education in this setting. These operated at the individual, family, community and school levels. In addition,

Abbreviations: HIV, Human Immunodeficiency Virus; KHPT, Karnataka Health Promotion Trust; LSHTM, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine; SC/ST, scheduled caste/scheduled tribe; SDMC, School Development and Monitoring Committee; UNICEF, United Nations Children's Fund; WHO, World Health Organization.

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¹ SC/ST are legal categories in India. Some members of this group prefer the term 'Dalit' which connotes people who are 'broken, crushed and torn apart' (Kumar, 2007: 124) and which is part of a wider political vision. However, to keep with the project terminology, we use the term 'SC/ST' in this article.

some enablers to education were also described by the girls and their guardians and teachers.

Despite data on the numbers of SC/ST girls who do not complete their lower secondary education, and evidence of the detrimental impact little or no education can have on a girl's lifetime well being, there is little published research examining the factors contributing to high rates of education attrition in this context. This research project was conducted to better understand the social and cultural factors that encourage SC/ST adolescent girls to drop out of school, and forms part of the STRIVE initiative, a research consortium to tackle the structural drivers of HIV, at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (www.strive.lshtm.ac.uk). The findings will be used to inform program design of an intervention called *Samata*, a program working with SC/ST adolescent girls, their families, and secondary schools in Northern Karnataka, which aims to reduce vulnerability to HIV by increasing secondary school enrolment and completion, increasing age of marriage, and delaying entry into sex work. It also speaks to a growing body of international literature on the barriers to girls' full participation in education, and on social and educational programmes that might help to address this.

The article firstly sets out the context for the study through a review of relevant literature on the advantages of education for girls, and the discrimination that many of them face, particularly where gender intersects with other forms of disadvantage such as caste. The subsequent sections set out the research design and the findings.

2. Background

It is widely accepted that education greatly benefits individuals and countries and is one of the most effective development investments nations and their donor partners can make (USAID, 2008). Education helps catalyze economic growth of a country by building human capital (Abuya et al., 2014). Countries with a higher number of educated individuals are more likely to be politically stable, have better life expectancy rates and significant improvements in health (USAID, 2008). Educating girls and boys produces similar outputs in terms of their subsequent earnings and future opportunities, however educating girls results in greater socio-economic gains, which benefit entire communities (USAID, 2008).

Beyond these human capital arguments, education can help increase a girl's sense of agency and impact on her bargaining power within her household. On one level, this can give her, for example, a greater ability to make choices about her fertility and family size (Fancy, 2012; Brown, 2012). Education can also reduce negative health outcomes for girls (Fancy, 2012). There is clear evidence that the more education (especially secondary schooling) a girl receives, the more likely she is to marry later, become a mother when she is older, and have a lower lifetime fertility (Brown, 2012; Temin and Levine, 2009). Problems associated with pregnancy and childbirth are a leading cause of death for girls ages 15–19 worldwide (WHO, 2014) and early child-bearing is associated with an increased risk of maternal and child morbidity and mortality (Gibbs et al., 2012; Conde-Agudelo et al., 2005; Santhya, 2011). Education has a strong influence on a women's use of health systems during pregnancy and childbirth, as well as their knowledge on sexual health, contraception, STIs and HIV (UNICEF, 2011).

These are some of the health and material benefits that education can bring, not least through a girl's increased sense of agency. However, this is a relatively narrow conceptualization of 'gender justice' (Dejaeghere and Wiger, 2013). Empowerment is a benefit in itself, albeit one that is widely under-theorised (Monkman, 2011). It demands, among other things, a critical understanding of one's reality, self-esteem, and the agency to act on inequality and to earn an independent living (Stromquist, 2002). For these, context matters, as 'environments condition possibilities' (Monkman, 2011: 6).

For these and other reasons, the Millennium Development Goals, other Education for All movements, and most recently the Sustainable Development Goals have all highlighted the imperatives of girls' education. However, despite progress made toward challenging targets, the latest UNICEF report on out-of-school children reports an estimated 58 million primary and lower secondary school-age children are not enrolled in school globally, with 31 million of these being girls (UNICEF, 2015). India has an estimated 11.9 million primary and lower secondary school-age children (6–13 years old) out of school (UNICEF, 2014b), with the proportion of girls out-of-school being higher than that of boys (UNICEF, 2014a). In addition, beyond the question of access, there is considerable evidence that gendered social and schooling experiences are a major factor in discouraging female participation and learning, from social attitudes to the educated female, to schools as sites of gendered discrimination and violence (Stromquist and Fischmann, 2009).

In order to address these concerns, it is important to understand the particularities of specific cultural and resource contexts, and to acknowledge the intersection of gender with other forms of disadvantage. India is a salient case study, not only for its scale but for the complexities of disadvantage. There are an estimated 111 million adolescent girls in India (Nanda et al., 2013) and their socialization and development is framed by the socio-cultural environment (KHPT, 2012b). Indian society is highly patriarchal in its values and beliefs and gender discrimination often starts before a child is born (Nayar, 2011). Sons are usually preferred over daughters, a phenomenon known as 'son preference', and this can disadvantage girls throughout their life (Nayar, 2011). Women and girls are expected to adhere to strict gender-related norms and departures from these expectations can bring shame upon a young woman and her family (KHPT, 2012b). In the Indian context, caste plays a particularly significant role both in defining expectations and in shaping interactions at and around school, and members of the SC/ST groups are much less likely to attend or stay in education than other children, especially girls.

This study focuses on SC/ST adolescent girls from Bijapur and Bagalkot in northern Karnataka. These girls face marginalization for multiple reasons. Firstly, their gender means they are less likely to attend school and more likely to be married post-menarche, compared to boys (Nair, 2013). Secondly, they are members of these disadvantaged castes of the Hindu caste system—a stigmatizing system of social exclusion which affects all aspects of life including financial security due to poor livelihood options (Olcott, 1944). Thus, most (88.6%) SC/ST households in Bijapur are estimated to be living below the poverty line (Karnataka, 2008). Thirdly, Bijapur and Bagalkot districts perform poorly, compared to the rest of Karnataka, in terms of the Human Development Index (Nair, 2013) and the Gender Related Development Index (KHPT, 2012a). More specifically, SC/ST girls in Bagalkot and Bijapur districts have among the highest school drop-out rates in Karnataka, with 17% of SC/ST dropping out of school in Bijapur and 12% of SC/ST girls dropping out in Bagalkot in transition from 7th grade to 8th grade, compared with 5% of all girls in Karnataka (Javalkar, 2014).

In northern Karnataka, many adolescent girls are "missing" from their natal households, likely due to movement to their husband's home following child marriage (KHPT, 2012c) or to entry into sex work through the *Devadasi*² tradition (KHPT, 2012a). The

² 'Devadasi' means 'Servant of God' (Orchard, 2007) and in this region, girls and women are dedicated to different gods and goddesses, after which they become the wives or servants of the deities and perform various temple duties (Blanchard et al., 2005). These can include the provision of sexual services to priests and patrons of the temples.

Devadasi tradition is widespread in northern Karnataka, and is a culturally and economically valued form of sex work. Although this practice is banned in India, approximately 1000–10,000 young girls are inducted into the system each year (Orchard, 2007).

This study is one of the first to explore barriers and enablers to education among SC/ST adolescent girls in India. A previous study conducted in Odisha state, India (Mishra, 2011), examined barriers to higher education (university or technical colleges) for tribal girls (some SC/ST) and reported economic, institutional, social, and cultural constraints to girls pursuing higher education. Similar research studies have also been conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa (Abuya et al., 2014; Camfield, 2011; Tanye, 2008; Roby et al., 2009) with the findings also detailing numerous barriers to education for girls, commonly rooted in gender roles that are socially constructed. Despite a focus on gender mainstreaming at the policy level (Unterhalter, 2007), social institutions are resilient, and discriminatory social norms affect demand as well as restrict the benefits of improved access such as, for example, delayed marriage and childbirth (UNESCO, 2014). Where gender and caste intersect, disadvantage is potentially multiplied.

Research on barriers to girls' and SC/ST participation in school needs to be situated in the wider evidence on participation rates globally. International attention was focused on girls' access to primary education through the Dakar Education for All (EFA) goals and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), both of which set targets for gender equity in participation in primary schooling. Progress in access to schooling for girls has shown significant acceleration during the implementation period of the MDGs. It is estimated that if trends from the 1990s had continued without intervention, only 25 countries would have gained parity of access during this period, but as of 2015, 62 additional countries had achieved equal participation of boys and girls in basic schooling (UNICEF, 2015). India technically achieved gender parity during this era (UNICEF, 2015). In the quest to provide education for all, as gross enrolment rates have gone up, the international focus has turned to the need to promote access to quality education for the most marginalized. These are the groups who have been hardest to reach in terms of participation in primary schooling, in terms of the quality of education they experience, and in terms of outcomes, including completion rates. Poverty deepens disparities and is a strong determinant of participation in secondary schooling, where parity is still elusive. It is in many ways easier to increase access at earlier stages than to address the multiple inequalities that are substantial barriers to retention beyond the basic stage (Chismaya et al., 2012).

Discrimination is expressed and experienced in a range of ways. Girls may be commodified within the family as sources of gendered labour, and are under pressure to marry early as their roles are defined to a large degree in terms of their marital status and childbearing potential (Siddhu, 2010). At school, teaching and learning processes may signal overtly or subtly that boys are superior learners, and the quality of their schooling and classroom experiences is particularly influential in terms of girls' decisions regarding staying in school (Siddhu, 2010). Among the most evident and the most damaging experiences is gendered and/or sexual violence. School is not necessarily a safe space, and the environment can be 'sexually charged' (Chismaya et al., 2012). Harassment and rape are prevalent internationally as part of girls' experiences of school (Harber 2004; Leach et al., 2014). Where travel to school involves distance, security becomes an increased issue and cause for family concern (UNESCO, 2015). As with other dimensions of inequality, SC/ST girls are particularly vulnerable. Where 'purity' is valued, SC/ST girls are easier targets (Nightingale,

2011). Rape can be used to intimidate and to assert power in reinforcing caste divides (Purkayastha et al., 2003).

Given this complex set of relations and social contexts, it is important to see beyond the question of access to a wider understanding of participation. Unterhalter (2014) argues:

Getting girls into school is promoted as a silver bullet for development problems, which occlude discussions of what is taught, to whom, the socio-economic relations of schooling, work and livelihoods, the messy and difficult relationships associated with learning and teaching about sexuality and violence, and the politics of who presents what to whom (Unterhalter, 2014: 120).

This research aims to give voice to SC/ST girls in order to bring their experiences to light to inform this process. Beyond this, it also documents girls' agency, aspirations and decision-making as dimensions of empowerment, and acknowledges what constrains these in this context (Chismaya et al., 2012).

3. Methods

A quantitative situational analysis was conducted early in 2013 by KHPT to obtain information on dropout rates among SC/ST adolescent girls in northern Karnataka. In order to understand and capture the perspectives of key people shaping the experiences and decision-making processes around the participation of disadvantaged adolescent girls in schooling, a qualitative study was also undertaken.

We conducted 55 in-depth semi-structured interviews with SC/ST girls (N=22), their parents/guardians (N=22) and school teachers/administrative members (N=11) in 11 villages in Bijapur and Bagalkot districts. Five in-depth interviews were conducted in each village, including one adolescent girl in school, one who had dropped out of school, their respective guardians, and one teacher. Inclusion criteria were limited to girls aged 12–17 years who either were enrolled and attending school on a regular basis or who had attended school for a minimum of 1–2 years previously. The interviews covered the themes of decision making, education, marriage, entry into workforce, sex work and education of girls and were tailored to the roles and needs of the participants.

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants from each village. This type of sampling strategy is commonly used in qualitative research to explicitly select participants whom will generate appropriate data (Green and Thorogood, 2004). Research investigators who had prior experience working in both districts conducted the interviews. The interview team of 6 investigators, 3 male and 3 female, received training on probing and rapport building. In order to reduce barriers to discussing difficult issues, male researchers interviewed male participants and female researchers undertook interviews with adolescent girls. All interviews were conducted in *Kannada*, the local language.

The study was approved by the St John's Medical College & Hospital Institutional Ethical Review Board in India and the LSHTM ethics committee. Participation in the study was by informed consent. Written informed consent was also obtained from the adolescent girl and from the girl's parent or legal guardian. All interviews were audio taped with the permission of the interviewees and the recordings were transcribed either the same day or soon thereafter. Researchers also took observational field notes after each interview, which were later translated into English and cross checked and filed with the interview transcript. Translators translated the transcribed interviews from *Kannada* to English. Interviewers were labelled (I) and respondents were labelled (R) in the transcripts.

A framework approach was taken to analyse the data: familiarisation, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping and interpretation (Pope et al., 2000). A structured coding framework was developed (LB, SN, HS), and was adapted with continued data familiarisation. Mapping and interpretation were structured on the basis of meeting the aims and objectives of the research as well as the dominant themes emerging from the data. Creation of participant summary profiles was useful for comparing daughter and parent matches within the data set and to cross-reference profiles with coding. Coding and categorising of data was done using Dedoose Software. Inter coder reliability checks were conducted by three researchers (LB, SN, HS) to try to maximize reliability in terms of coding and interpretation of the data.

An iterative process of clarification was done to ensure data reliability and rigor. This included visiting original transcripts, discussions with the interview team, as well as primary field exposure and informal discussions with stakeholders.

The major strength of this study is that it examined the views of various stakeholders regarding the same issue, which provided rich data and allowed for comparison across groups. The interviews discussed a range of highly sensitive topics including child marriage, sex work and 'eve teasing' (a euphemism for a situation where a girl is sexually harassed or assaulted). In some cases, there were challenges in conducting interviews in private, as sometimes family and community members would come in during the interview and watch. Although interviews were stopped during such episodes, and re-started once privacy had been reasserted, this may also have influenced what participants reported, for fear of confidentiality being broken. The interviews were translated from Kannada to English and some nuances may have been difficult to translate. However, through cross-checking and other

processes rigour was maximized within the expectations of validity in qualitative research.

4. Findings

The data show a wide range of barriers converge to prevent girls from attending school, along with some enablers that support girls to stay in school. Almost all of the adolescent girls who dropped out of school cited more than one reason for dropping out, with not being interested in school and lack of support from family being prevalent. In contrast, a supportive family was the top cited reason for staying in school.

The barriers and enablers that emerged from the findings can be categorised into macro-societal, educational, inter-personal, and individual factors. We developed a conceptual framework, based on the findings, detailed in Fig. 1.

The concentric circles of the framework bear a resemblance to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecosystemic model. However, the model was derived from analysis of the data gathered and reflects the specifics of the Indian, gender, local and caste contexts. Below we elaborate on the relevant findings from each of these layers, using illustrative quotes from a range of respondents.

4.1. Macro-societal

4.1.1. Belief that there is no use in educating girls

The value a girl places on staying in school is strongly influenced by her community. Both in school and out of school adolescent girls felt that their communities valued educating boys more than educating girls. This was supported by interviews with parents and teachers. For example, one teacher observed that in a male dominated society, boy's education takes precedence over the education of a girl.

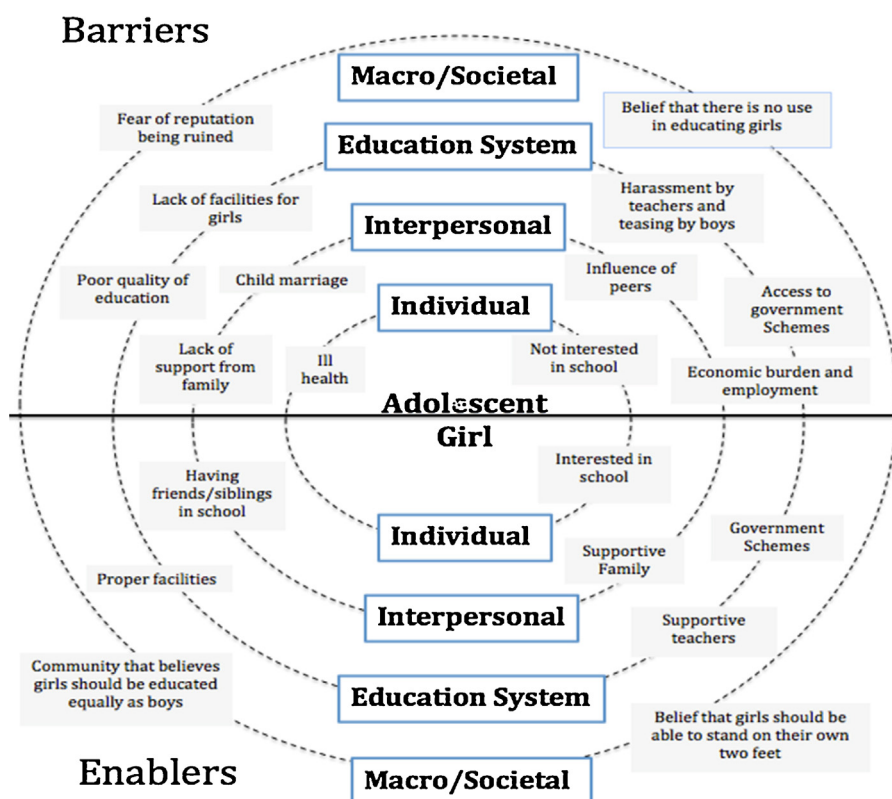


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of the barriers and enablers of education for SC/ST adolescent girls at the individual, interpersonal, educational system and macro/societal levels.

(I) Are there different reasons for girls and boys dropping out of school? (R) This is a male dominated society and boy's education takes precedence over the education of the girl. Parents want their sons to come up in life and prosper and girls get less preference, as they will be going to their in-laws anyway. (Male teacher, Bijapur)

Many of the adolescent girls stated that boys are encouraged to study more because girls will eventually be sent to their husband's home and boys will be the ones to get a job and take care of parents. Teachers confirmed that this was the dominant view in society although many maintained that this did not align with their personal views.

Some girls felt that community members would question a family's decision to invest in education in addition to the money that would need to be spent on marriage (dowry). In contrast, the community would not question a families' decision to continue a boy's schooling. Some families said they would take out loans to pay for private education for their sons but would put their daughters into free government schools that were perceived to be poorer in quality.

There was also a belief that there is no value in educating girls because even if a girl were educated, there would be no livelihood opportunities for her other than farming and manual labour, especially girls from SC/ST castes. This belief appeared mainly from adolescent girls out of school and their respective parent/guardian. There was little evidence from the interviews that participant's perceived education in its own right to be an important reason for supporting girls to stay in school, especially after puberty.

4.1.2. Fear of reputation being ruined

The fear that sending girls to school could ruin a girl's and her family's reputation, emerged strongly from the interviews, particularly with parents. Many parents described a strong sense of fear that after a girl reaches puberty, she might engage in 'love affairs' with someone on her way to or whilst at school, and engage in behaviours deemed inappropriate within the cultural context. This in turn could ruin her marriage prospects and the families' reputation within the community. Leaving school was perceived as a way to avoid this risk. Thus, if parents felt that their daughter was going down the 'wrong path', this presented a socially acceptable reason to discontinue her education. This is exemplified by one male teacher:

(R) Some do this – early marriage – due to economic issues at home and yet others follow superstition blindly. (I) What type of superstition is it? (R) Superstition means, once the girls attain puberty, they are likely to fall in love with someone (more deviation) and they may deviate from the right path. (I) What does it mean 'deviating from the right path'? (R) It means by mistake they might fall in love. It should not happen like this. Nowadays, girls watch TVs, read newspapers and hence the elders think that they might deviate and elders decide that girls once they have attained puberty, they should not be kept at home. They want to see them married off as early as possible and this type of superstitions are prevalent in the families. (Male teacher, Bijapur)

The rumour or allegation of an affair with a boy can tarnish a girl's reputation and bring shame to her family and community. The blame for 'eve teasing', was also put on the girl as she is held responsible for maintaining her and her family's honour. This resulted in girls being punished if they experienced 'eve teasing' or had a relationship with a boy. There were two examples when school authorities responded to incidents of 'eve teasing', for example a boy chasing a female schoolmate, by expelling the girl from school.

Sometimes as recourse to damaging the girl and her family's reputation, the girl was married off to someone in another village. Occasionally, to avoid shame and punishment, an adolescent girl would elope with her lover and all family ties would be severed. The seriousness of this issue was exemplified by one teacher who noted that an adolescent girl in school committed suicide after her parents found out about her relationship with a boy.

4.2. Education system

The education system in both districts had a wide range of barriers to keeping girls in school. Various factors such as distance, quality of education and harassment by teachers and boys arose from the interviews. In addition, despite government schemes that enable girls to attend school through the provision of financial incentives such as bicycles, school uniforms, and scholarships, access to these schemes was not based on equal opportunity.

4.2.1. Poor quality education

During the field site visit, a meeting with a local school headmaster found that schools were ordered by local education authorities not to fail female students, in fear that their families would withdraw them from school. However the repercussions of this are that girl's progress to an academic year beyond their capability, potentially leading to disengagement and consequent drop out. The quality of education that the girls received was also questionable. Some girls did not know how to write their own names, even after completing 7th standard (end of primary school). This was frequently cited as a cause of embarrassment and a reason for dropping out of school. One adolescent girl noted that sometimes teachers did not show up to class, which also shapes the quality of education girls receive.

4.2.2. Harassment by teachers and 'teasing' by boys

Harassment from teachers and teasing by boys on the way to school prevented girls from feeling safe and also resulted in school dropout. In addition, teachers were often involved in scolding, harassing, insulting or physically punishing poorly performing girls. One teacher interviewed admitted to verbally and physically harassing her students even when she knew it was punishable by law. Though the majority of remarks regarding pupil-teacher interactions were positive, with teachers encouraging students, there was one case where a girl had left school solely because her teacher beat and scolded her.

What to do, if madam was not there I could have studied . . . because of her I left school, this is still disturbing me . . . The only reason is that madam beat, so I left the school. (Adolescent girl out of school, 14 years)

In addition, SC/ST girls often faced exclusion on the bases of caste and their poor academic performance. They noted that they were more likely to experience teasing and be socially isolated, which made them feel left out, which in turn encouraged school dropout. Furthermore teasing by boys on the way to school was another factor which caused adolescent girl schools drop out. Parents of one girl who had dropped out reported that the distance to their daughter's school was too far and they feared that boys would tease their daughter en route to school and she may engage in love affairs during this time.

4.2.3. Lack of toilet facilities for girls

Another issue that arose during field visits was the lack of toilet facilities for girls at some schools. When we asked one of the teachers where the girls used the bathroom, she pointed to outside the fence, meaning girls had to use the field behind the school. This

poses a problem for girls, especially during menses, and may mean they are more inclined to stay home to avoid this problem.

4.2.4. Access to government schemes

The Department of Social Welfare in Karnataka provides a number of schemes to SC/ST communities to support school attendance, including the provision of scholarships, uniforms, books, bags, pens and bicycles. All adolescent girls and nearly all parents were aware of the government schemes available, with all except one accessing the schemes. Girls and parents suggested schemes were essential in enabling girls to continue school, however there were complaints of corruption and gaps in the accessibility and coverage of the schemes. Parents often noted that the schemes did not provide enough to cover real and hidden costs, and extra money was needed to cover the excess. In addition, some girls stated that their parents took all the scholarship money and used it for other household costs. Despite the existence of government schemes, the headmaster from one school highlighted the need for parents to plan financially to overcome the difficulties in sending children to school.

To support and enable girls to attend and stay in school, teachers visited homes of girls who had dropped out of school to speak to the families and suggest solutions. Some teachers supported girls financially to enable them to stay in school. One headmaster of a girl's school even went as far as taking care of a girl's baby, so she could study.

I have helped many needy students in my service. I have given them notebooks, pens. Even after passing out from here, I have followed them up. I have watched whether they discontinue after 8th (and if so) I have persuaded them to continue. I have asked (them) to phone me, if they need money for fees. I have paid from my pocket. I will tell you one more incident. There was one girl she was made to discontinue because she has to look after small baby. I told that girl to bring the baby to school. I looked after the baby. I fed the baby with biscuits and food. The same student stood 1st in the school. This was an unforgettable achievement for me. (Headmaster of a girls-only school)

4.3. Interpersonal

Adolescent girls experienced a wide range of interpersonal factors that prevented them from going to school or influenced their dropout.

4.3.1. Child marriage

Child marriage is a common practice in this community. Many of the adolescent girls had friends who were already married and a few were married themselves or were engaged to be married. One girl attending school noted that she knew of seven to nine child marriages which had taken place that year and all of those girls had stopped attending school. Despite child marriage being illegal in north Karnataka, they were still taking place. Admitting that child marriages were still occurring was difficult for some respondents fearing that they would get into trouble. One father told the research team that he would wait till his 14-year old daughter turned 18 to get her married and he was on his way to take her to school, but his daughter told us that she was already married and had dropped out of school. It emerged from the interviews that getting married at an older age was seen as undesirable; if you were not married by the age of 18, community members would gossip and wonder if there was something wrong with you.

4.3.2. Lack of support from family

In some cases, girls were interested in studying but there was a lack of support from family members to continue education. Lack

of support was sometimes related to the fear of engaging in 'love affairs'. However, there were also two cases of physical abuse from the girl's father, which prevented one from attending school and created pressures to drop out of school for another.

(R) My father doesn't allow us for further education hence we will go for daily wages work, then what to do. After completion of 10th standard we have to go for daily wage work. In future I want to learn tailoring. Here my mother and sister have sewing machine and she will teach me sewing when I complete my 10th standard. Yes . . . Sometimes he says, your elders (girls) have left the school and are going for work, so even you go along with them. (I) When he says like that, how do you feel? (R) I feel like going to school, but when he says like that, then I feel its better I go for work, I feel both . . . he troubles me, my mother and everybody at home and beats and abuses us. (I) So because of this, do you face any problems doing your studies? (R) Yes, it happens. (I) Problems, in what ways? (R) He comes home drunk and starts shouting, so we cannot concentrate on the studies and cannot study. (I) Ok. Then does he say anything about sending you to school or not, anything as such? (R) Yes he says, in fact he tells me to leave the school. (Adolescent girl in school, 15)

Fortunately, some parents were enablers of education by encouraging their daughters to stay in school. Often they said this was because they were illiterate themselves and thus encouraged education for their children. However, many parents did not have any parameters about how *much* schooling would be good for their children, as they had not completed school themselves.

Interestingly in this study three adolescent girls mentioned that they were married and all of them were attending school. Only one girl who dropped out of school mentioned that she would be getting married in three months' time. All three of the married girls mentioned that they had strong support from their families, with one of these reporting that her mother-in-law supported her school attendance, even after marriage.

4.3.3. Influence of peers

Another interpersonal factor that influenced whether a girl stayed or dropped out of school was the influence of peers. Most of the adolescent girls stated that they did not know anyone who had obtained higher education (Pre-University Course-11th and 12th standard). Thus, there was a lack of positive role models for adolescent girls in these districts. In addition, two of the adolescent drop-out girls spoke about how an adolescent girl dropping out can influence her friends dropping out as well. One of the girls who dropped out of school mentioned that she knew of 10–12 other girls who also dropped out of school. Thus, if there are a large number of girls dropping out of school and getting married, it can be seen as the norm and have a domino effect, influencing other girls to drop out as well.

4.3.4. Economic burden and employment

While the social and economic context dictates the impact on girls to a large extent, most of the interviewees noted that the perception of girls as economic burdens or assets is experienced interpersonally through the family. All groups described economic barriers as key reasons for girls leaving school; both the ability to pay direct and indirect costs of school attendance and the girl as an economic resource in the labour market. Many times as some of these communities do not own land, the parents or the older men in the family migrate for work and the girls have to support the family by taking care of those remaining at home. Girls contribute by doing housework, which frees up the mother to work outside and also by working part time or full time to meet daily expenses. In many cases, girls felt it was more important to stay at home, do

household chores and therefore support their families rather than attend school.

(I) "Home-work" means? What work do you do? You left school because of your house problem, now how do you help them in work? (R) Cooking, my mother will not do anything. Morning she will go by the 6am bus and return at 6pm, after she goes, cooking, washing clothes, utensils, grazing two sheep, if current (electricity) comes filling water and cleaning house I do (I) Cleaning house and all you do? (R) Yes (I) Do you go to work in others land? (R) Yes (I) You go? How much wage do they give you? (R) 150 rupees (~\$2.20 USD) they give, from morning 10 to evening 5, morning from 8 to 1, they give 100 rupees (~\$1.50 USD). (Adolescent girl out of school, 15)

In contrast to the above factors, there were some interpersonal enablers which emerged from the study. The majority of school-attending SC/ST girl's mentioned that they had family support and encouragement to stay in school, despite community and economic pressures. One mother of a girl in school stated:

(I) Anyways now your 3 children go to school. So by sending them to school, in what way do you feel it is beneficial? (R) What benefits, simply we send them, so that at least they will study and be educated. No matter even if we have to starve one time, let them learn and stand up on their own feet. Let them not become useless like us, so we send them to school. (Mother of adolescent girl in school)

In addition, in this group, girls who had peers and siblings who valued and stayed in school were more likely to stay in school, compared to girls who had peers and siblings who dropped out of school.

4.4. Personal

4.4.1. Not valuing education

The main personal factor for a girl dropping out of school was her not valuing education. Girls who were still in school valued education as highly useful for improving future livelihood options, obtaining a position such as a teacher and being able to avoid employment in 'daily wage'. Girls who had dropped out of school had mixed feelings on the value of education. One dropout said that some of her educated friends are married now and when she sees them she thinks there is no use in going to school.

There was a clear difference in the confidence levels of the girls who were in school and girls out of school, although it is not possible to know which came first, confidence or continuing in schooling. Girls who were in school valued education more, were determined to finish their schooling, had better support and encouragement from their families to study, and stated that they will refuse to leave school in order to get married and move to their in-laws. In contrast, girls who dropped out of school, had lower levels of confidence when speaking about their future and gave more decision making power to their parents. This can be exemplified through two cases:

Adolescent girl out of school

Some of my educated friends are married now. When I see them I don't think education is of any use. As per my knowledge, learning only till 7th (end of primary) it is not useful for anything. They can only put a signature. Now even aged people can put sign, signature is common now. After 7th if I learn 2nd year [12th standard] and then still I don't get job then it is not useful. If we get some job then only it is worth. Both 7th standard and 2nd year [12th standard] student can put sign. There will be no difference between both of them. (Adolescent girl out of school, 15)

Adolescent girl in school

(I) You now said you will marry at 20 years, after getting job you will marry you said. At home if they ask you to marry before that age what will you do? (R) I won't, I will wait till I get a job, till I get job he should wait, why should I marry, till now whatever I have studied will go waste, after getting job only I will marry. (Adolescent girl in school, 15)

In some cases, personal reasons for drop-out were influenced by the other inter-personal and macro-societal factors. Interestingly, one girl withdrew herself from school because she was not interested in school and wanted to prevent the risk of engaging in love affairs. She was aware of the 'bad habits' of her peers and did not want to get involved. She stated that it was solely her decision to drop out of school; however when further probed, she noted that her family was living in poverty, her brother was ill and her father did not want her to go to school. In addition she mentioned that her school teachers did not attend class regularly and did not teach properly. Thus, although her main stated reason for drop out was that she was not interested in school, a variety of other factors outside herself also influenced her 'choice' to drop out.

5. Discussion

This study has found a wide range of factors among these SC/ST adolescent girls for both dropping out and remaining in school. At the macro-societal level, there was a strong community belief that there is little point in continuing education for girls as they will marry and leave their natal home to live with their in-laws. The fear of a girl's reputation and her family's honour being damaged due to suspicions around perceived or actual 'love affairs' with fellow students was another key macro-societal barrier. There were also barriers to girl's attendance in the education system, including poor quality of education, abusive teachers, teasing by boys, a lack of facilities for girls and barriers to accessing government schemes. The main interpersonal factors which influenced a girl discontinuing her education included a lack of support from family, direct and indirect costs to the household, child marriage and the influence of peers. Finally, personal barriers included girl's not valuing education, which in turn, was probably influenced by the other barriers. In contrast, the key enablers that encouraged girls to stay in school were a supportive family, supportive teachers, peers and siblings in school, and a girl valuing education herself.

The influence of different layers of factors around the individual girl can be difficult to tease apart. For example, a girl may state that she does not value education herself, but the origin of that attitude can be multi-layered. A girl may experience economic burden as an interpersonal phenomenon directed through the family, but it is shaped by the harsh social and economic reality of SC/ST families. This aligns with the literature on empowerment, which emphasise both collective and personal dimensions (Stromquist, 2002). Girls in education seemed more confident in themselves and their futures, but it is not possible to be certain whether such girls are more likely to stay in education or whether schooling gave them confidence.

Our research confirms that gender inequality remains strong in these communities in North Karnataka and gender roles for girls are socially constructed and maintained in this context. This is amplified in the case of SC/ST girls, given their perceived lower status and worth. Education for boys was more valued than for girls, as girls will eventually marry and live with her in laws. In addition, marrying girls at a young age is desirable in these communities to avoid the potential for 'love affairs' and to avoid gossip by community members who will wonder if there is something wrong with an unmarried 'older' girl. Relationships between boys and girls and curiosity over boys are arguably a normal part of (heterosexual) adolescence. However in this context

it is taboo and the consequences are severe. In addition, a lack of sex education in schools in these communities does not help in addressing these changes during puberty, the tensions between boys and girls during this period, or address the power imbalances that frame them.

Addressing the quality of education is equally as important as addressing community norms in these communities, as a poor quality education can be demotivating to a girl child even if she is encouraged to attend school by her family.

Physical and verbal abuse by teachers, teachers not showing up for lessons, students being passed even when they are not understanding what is being taught and the lack of toilets for girls were all cited as important issues. Sanitation is a prevalent issue, particularly for girls who are menstruating, but there has been some success elsewhere in India where separate latrines have been made available (Adukia, 2014). Evidence from literature (Siddhu, 2010) emphasizes the particular importance of lived experiences of schooling in framing girls' decisions about continuing. Despite the poor quality of education in some settings, being in school and obtaining an education was still found to have a positive effect. Staying in school seemed to increase a girl's sense of agency and confidence, with girls stating they will continue to stay in school if they are married or asked to get married. The majority of girls who continued in school mentioned that they have supportive parents, who support them to attend school even in difficult times.

Many of these findings resonate with the wider literature and point to barriers which are common across different contexts. Many of these have origins in wider social attitudes, which are then expressed through the school, the family, or in the girls' own aspirations and confidence. Beyond the specific individual barriers, broader patterns emerge which raise questions about the limited agency of girls with regard to their educational choices, particularly in contexts where girls' education is undervalued, where girls themselves are valued mainly as brides, and where they are commodified as economic burdens or assets. Confidence is a virtuous cycle: confident girls who believe in their education are arguably more likely to fight to stay in school, despite competing pressures, and having stayed on are likely to grow in self-esteem and agency. This relies heavily on family support and a quality learning environment, neither of which can be assumed: some of the girls in this study were fortunate enough to experience these while others were not.

Taken together, addressing the poor quality of education, changing community gender norms that are socially constructed and teaching parents about the benefits of education so they can support their daughters to go to school are all key areas for policy makers and programme implementers to focus on. Interventions need to understand the process of discrimination in schooling in order to address them (Stromquist and Fischmann, 2009). Indeed, 'policy interventions that do not account for discriminatory social institutions fail to tackle the drivers of gender inequality' (OECD, 2012).

6. Conclusion

This study has found numerous barriers and a few enablers to staying in school for SC/ST adolescent girls in North Karnataka. Some of these resonate with existing literature on girls' participation in schooling, while others are more specific to the context or exacerbated by these girls' disadvantaging by the caste system. Education has numerous benefits for the adolescent girl. However, there are several challenges to staying in school for a SC/ST adolescent girl in these two districts, which need to be addressed. Focusing on adolescent girls, especially in rural

Northern Karnataka, where they face a wide variety of issues is crucial to allowing them to reach their full potential.

The study highlights the importance of involving multiple stakeholders to overcome the barriers to education for low caste girls, and of working to change beliefs and expectations around gender norms as well as improving girls' experiences of education in this setting. Ultimately, successful interventions will need to address changing gender norms and relationships at the macro-societal and family level as well as improve the quality and value of education.

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