



Correlates of school dropout and absenteeism among adolescent girls from marginalized community in north Karnataka, south India



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ABSTRACT

Secondary education among lower caste adolescent girls living in rural Karnataka, South India, is characterized by high rates of school drop-out and absenteeism. A cross-sectional baseline survey (N=2275) was conducted in 2014 as part of a cluster-randomized control trial among adolescent girls (13–14 year) and their families from marginalized communities in two districts of north Karnataka. Bivariate and multivariate logistic regression models were used. Overall, 8.7% girls reported secondary school dropout and 8.1% reported frequent absenteeism (past month). In adjusted analyses, economic factors (household poverty; girls' work-related migration), social norms and practices (child marriage; value of girls' education), and school-related factors (poor learning environment and bullying/harassment at school) were associated with an increased odds of school dropout and absenteeism. Interventions aiming to increase secondary school retention among marginalized girls may require a multi-level approach, with synergistic components that address social, structural and economic determinants of school absenteeism and dropout.

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1. Introduction

School dropout is prevalent in many low and middle-income countries (LMIC) and disproportionately affects girls (UNESCO & United Nations Girls Education Initiative, 2015). It determines subsequent life trajectories both for the girls

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themselves and for the next generation. Little or no schooling is associated with extreme poverty and hunger (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2014); gender inequality (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2011; Warner, Malhotra, & McGonagle, 2012); increased child mortality (Ghosh, 2012; Mehra & Agrawal, 2004; Prakash, Singh, Pathak, & Parasuraman, 2011); poor maternal health (Arthur, Bangha, & Sankoh, 2013); increased teenage pregnancy rates (Baird, Garfein, McIntosh, & Ozler, 2012; Duflo, Dupas, & Kremer, 2012); early sexual debut; child marriage (Hallfors et al., 2011; Raj, 2010); increased fertility levels (Arthur et al., 2013) and increased HIV infection (Baird et al., 2012; Pettifor et al., 2008). Secondary school dropout is also associated with higher levels of intimate partner violence (Ackerson, Kawachi, Barbeau, & Subramanian, 2008; Hindin, Kishor, & Ansara, 2008). Conversely, educational attainment between late childhood and the mid-20s is a strong and independent predictor of cognitive capacity in midlife (Patton et al., 2016). The Millennium development goals, Education for All movements, and the Sustainable Development Goals have all highlighted the importance of girls' education, with substantial progress made in recent years towards increasing primary school enrolment, attendance, and completion in LMIC. However, high rates of attrition persist during secondary level education (13–16 years), particularly for girls, where gendered social and schooling experiences can combine with economic, marital and childbearing roles, to discourage adolescent girls' participation (Patton et al., 2016). To design interventions that address these concerns, it is important to understand the particularities of specific cultural contexts and to acknowledge the intersection of gender with other forms of disadvantage.

India has an estimated 11.9 million primary and lower secondary school-age (6–13 years) children out of school, with the highest proportion of these children being girls (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2014a, 2014b). Despite the government's commitment to universal secondary education, few boys (42%) and even fewer girls (32%) complete secondary school (aged 16 years) (International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) & Macro International, 2007). Gender inequality and the marginalization of women cuts across caste, class and geographic boundaries (Shah, 2011). School dropout tends to be highest among adolescent girls from low-income families, living in rural areas, with lower caste (scheduled caste/scheduled tribe) families facing particular barriers to accessing government schemes designed to alleviate poverty and promote girl school attendance (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2014a).

The districts of north Karnataka in south India are poor, rural regions where approximately 50% of the population live below the poverty line (International Institute for Population Sciences, 2010). The main form of employment is agriculture and manual labor, and families frequently migrate to the neighboring state of Maharashtra for seasonal work. Scheduled caste/scheduled tribe (SC/ST) are legal caste categories in India and refer to indigenous populations from the most disadvantaged strata of Indian society.¹ In Karnataka, SC/ST people comprise 24% of the total population (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2011). SC/ST girls from north Karnataka have the lowest enrolment in secondary school in the state, with 60% of SC/ST girls enrolled, compared with 67% of girls from higher castes and with 71% of boys (irrespective of caste) from this region. This falls well below the state average of 77% enrolment at secondary school level, highlighting gender, caste and regional disparities in educational uptake. Among those who do enrol in secondary school, SC/ST girls from north Karnataka have the highest likelihood of dropping out in the State (11% vs. 5.8% for all children in the state, class 8 (13/14 years) to class 9 (14/15 years)) (Prakash, Bhattacharjee, Thalinja, & Isac, 2016). Preliminary qualitative research with parents, teachers, and girls from north Karnataka suggest that multiple barriers to secondary school education exist, conceptualized as operating at the macro/societal, school, interpersonal and individual level (Bhagavatheswaran et al., 2016). These include societal norms (relating to child marriage, sexual purity and the low value placed on girl education), school level barriers (such as infrastructure, costs related to attending school, teacher discrimination of lower caste girls) and issues related to poverty (girls being needed to help at home or for income generation; family economic migration leading to disrupted schooling). However, large-scale surveys with adolescents examining this issue are lacking. A recent systematic review of education interventions on school attendance and learning suggested interventions that address multiple constraints may be necessary to achieve larger overall effects across multiple outcomes (Snilstveit et al., 2016), but it remains unclear which barriers to education programmers and policy makers should be prioritising to improve secondary school retention and completion among lower caste adolescent girls in rural India.

In 2014, we conducted a large cross-sectional survey with 2275 lower caste adolescent girls (aged 13–14 years) and their parents or carers, living in 80 village clusters and their catchment areas in two rural districts (Bijapur and Bagalkot) in north Karnataka. This survey data was collected as part of the baseline evaluation of the *Samata* intervention that aims to delay age at marriage and entry into sex work, by supporting entry into and retention of lower caste adolescent girls in secondary education (Beattie et al., 2015). The *Samata* project comprises a comprehensive, multi-level intervention that works with key stakeholders (girls, families, boys, villages, schools, policy makers) to change social norms regarding gender, child marriage and girls' education, as well as to link lower caste families to government schemes that provide scholarships, bicycles and other incentives to support retention in school. In this paper, we examine the individual, family, and school-level correlates of secondary level school dropout and absenteeism among lower caste adolescent girls in this context.

¹ Some members of this group prefer the term '*Dalit*' which connotes people who are 'broken, crushed and torn apart' ((Kumar, 2007)) 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.

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