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

Lalitha Bhagavatheeswaran[a,*], Sapna Nair[b], Hollie Stone[a], Shajy Isac[c], Tejaswini Hiremath[b], Raghavendra T.[b], Kumar Vadde[b], Mahesh Doddamane[b], H.S. Srikantamurthy[b], Lori Heise[a], Charlotte Watts[a], Michele Schweisfurth[d], Parinita Bhattacharjee[c], Tara S. Beattie[a]

[a] London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Keppel Street, WC1E 7HT, London, United Kingdom
[b] Karnataka Health Promotion Trust, Rajaji Nagar Industrial Town, Rajajinagar, Bengaluru, Karnataka 560023, India
[c] University of Manitoba, 66 Chancellors Cir., Winnipeg, R3T 2N2, Canada
[d] University of Glasgow, 11 Eldon Street, G3 6NH, Glasgow, United Kingdom

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,

[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

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[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.