

## **Schooling and Social Change Among Marginalized Girls in Rural Communities: An Education Equity Study**

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### ABSTRACT

Arguments for the expansion of formal schooling have long focused on individual outcomes from schooling, including increasing income, reducing poverty, delaying marriage and improving health, particularly for girls and women. For nearly three decades now, global education agendas have supported girls' education in an effort to achieve these outcomes. A large body of research analyzes girls' individual empowerment from schooling, but less attention is given to how schooling is creating change in families and communities, for particularly lowered caste girls in India. This article places longitudinal data from a three-year qualitative interview study of schoolgirls in Rajasthan alongside qualitative life history interviews of girls who completed secondary school in Uttarakhand to understand how schooling affects social changes for lowered castes. The analysis, using an intersectional and relational approach, illustrates how girls' schooling shifts kin and caste relations especially related to marriage and work, but in ways that do not transform the stickiness of caste and gender norms. The paper argues that educational policies and programs must attend to the ways in which caste is implicated in achieving outcomes of delayed marriage and formal employment for lowered caste girls in Indian communities if schooling is to create positive social change.

### INTRODUCTION

The expansion of formal schooling has long drawn on liberal arguments that more years of education increases income, delays marriage and improves health, outcomes regarded as beneficial for successful individuals and societies. International organizations and governments have put concerted effort for nearly three decades — a generation of young people — to achieve

these outcomes, particularly among girls (Herz, Herz and Sperling 2004; Sperling and Winthrop 2015; Tembon and Fort 2008; Unterhalter et al. 2014). While research on outcomes from schooling attends to differences by class/poverty level and location, there is still a tendency for policy and practice to regard education as a homogenous phenomenon that necessarily fosters empowerment (e.g., Herz, Herz and Sperling 2004). Educational interventions particularly oriented toward girls, however, have differential effects because they are situated within complex social structures that influence whether and how these social and economic outcomes can be attained.

India, with its very large population and deep inequalities, has been a focus of this global education agenda, where a large portion of the population, and predominantly girls and lowered caste children, have been out of school. UNESCO data show that 22.5 percent of primary age children were out of school in 1990. This improved to 16 percent in 2000 and 2.2 percent in 2013; these rates are now similar for girls and boys, with 1.4 percent of primary age girls out-of-school in India in 2013 (World Bank 2019). These changes in enrollment have prompted increases in participation in secondary schools, but not without variation in who attends. In 2010, the gender parity index for enrollment at the secondary level was .88; in 2015-16 it was 1.01 (Government of India 2016). But girls age 11-14 still represent a larger portion of out-of-school children with nearly 6% of girls in 2010 out of school, and 9 major states had excess of 5%. In 2018, the overall number has decreased to 4%, and 4 states have more than 5% (ASER 2018). These out-of-school rates increase considerably as children progress through upper secondary, to nearly 48 percent (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2020). Notably, children from scheduled

tribes<sup>1</sup> (and to a lesser extent scheduled castes<sup>2</sup>) still attend at lower rates and have higher drop-outs rates, particularly at the secondary level. For instance, in 2014-15, the average drop-out for boys and girls at secondary level was 17.2 percent and 16.9 percent, respectively, while for scheduled castes, it was more than 19 percent and for scheduled tribes, more than 24 percent, with slightly higher rates for boys than girls (Government of India 2016). These statistics illustrate that examining the effects of ‘education for all’ in India must take an intersectional approach – one that examines the different social structures that not only affect girls and boys, but also different castes.

These statistics of lowered caste and girls’ participation in schooling are not surprising when understood in the historical context of unequal gender and caste relations in India. The provision of modern state schooling has been a double-edged sword for Dalit boys and girls, which, on the one hand promised the possibility for emancipation, as envisioned and fought for by Dalit leaders; and on the other hand, schools have been a site of physical and psychological violence committed by upper caste teachers and pupils on the bodies and minds of Dalit children, thus pushing them out of the educational system, and reproducing existing caste structures (Paik, 2014). In particular, lowered caste girls face a double discrimination in being pushed out of school because of their gender and caste (Paik, 2014). Yet, policymakers tend to attribute low enrollment among girls from lowered castes to ignorance among their parents and cultural practices of early marriage, and the success of increasing enrollment to awareness campaigns

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<sup>1</sup> Scheduled tribes (ST) refer to tribes and tribal communities as specified in Article 342 of the Constitution of India.

<sup>2</sup> Scheduled castes (SC) refer to those groups historically deemed to be outside of the caste system in the Brahmanical order (also referred to as Dalits meaning oppressed), and who suffer from extreme social, educational and economic backwardness arising out of the historical practice of untouchability. These communities were notified as Scheduled Castes as per provisions contained in Clause 1 of Article 341 of the Constitution of India.

(Das & Pathak, 2012), rather than to the persistence of lowered caste parents and children in accessing education despite the violence it entails.

In 2001, the government of India enacted Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan – Education for All – at the primary level, and Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan in 2009 at the secondary level, to increase the number of schools, provide school resources, and support teacher development, among other interventions (Chakraborty, 2016). Programs, such as Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV), a national program that began in 2004, have explicitly aimed to improve access to and participation in primary and secondary schooling for girls (Shah 2011).

Furthermore, in 2009, the Right to Education (RTE) Act made formal schooling compulsory for all children ages 6-14. These policies and programs have now been in place for a decade or two, and have been credited for the increased participation of girls in school, particularly those of lowered castes who had been among the out-of-school population prior to the Act. Given these changes in the education system, it is important to examine how schooling is creating social change for lowered caste girls, not only as individuals becoming more educated, but by altering social norms and structures, such as caste and class mobilities.

This article examines how girls' participation in schooling is affecting lowered caste families and communities through an analysis of two related qualitative studies from rural Hindu communities in India. One was a longitudinal study conducted in Rajasthan of young girls who were participating in a life skills program that supported them to continue secondary school, and the other was a retrospective study of young women who had completed their secondary education with the support of the same international non-governmental organization (INGO) program. These datasets represent two snapshots of different levels of schooling for young girls in two different geographical and cultural contexts of India. While the futures and/or pasts of

these girls cannot be connected in linear ways, by examining the intersection of caste and gender relations in these communities, we aim to show how participating in primary, and then secondary, school is creating social changes, albeit in uncertain ways. Our focus in this article is on how participating in and continuing through schooling is affecting caste and gender relations in communities rather than on comparing these effects in the two different contexts. For example, if girls are delaying marriage by attending primary school, does this pattern appear for those who continue through secondary school and beyond? And if so, were there similar or different changes in caste and gender relations for those attending primary school and those who attended secondary school? In this article, we answer the following questions: What social and structural changes are occurring in lowered caste families and communities as a result of girls' increased participation in primary and secondary school? How do these changes affect girls and their parents/families similarly and differently in two different rural areas in India?

This paper contributes to the body of literature on education and empowerment, discussed in the next section, as it relates to caste and gender inequalities in two ways. First, this paper shifts the analytical focus away from girls as individuals to the complex social relations within which they live and learn, in response to critiques of individualist approaches of education for empowerment (Vavrus, 2002; Khoja-Moolji, 2018). This analysis utilizes a relational approach, meaning an ontological and epistemological orientation that sees personhood as always in formation inter-subjectively and in interaction with others, social structures and discourses. Second, the analysis attends to caste as necessarily implicated in these structures. While feminist scholars, and particularly Dalit feminists, have long called for an intersectional approach, much of the literature and policies on girls' education do not address how caste intersects with gender inequalities (Arya and Rathore 2020; Mohanty 2003; Sabharwal and

Sonalkar 2015). Through an intersectional and relational analysis, this paper aims to shed light on the gender and caste social structures that are changing and being reconstituted in new ways through girls participation in schooling.

### **FRAMING THE STUDY: TENSIONS BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL EMPOWERMENT AND STRUCTURAL CHANGE**

Education policies and programs for girls' education in India are informed by a dominant economic approach to girl's empowerment, which links education with a delay in early marriage and pregnancy, a reduction in child labor, and future labor market participation (Borkotoky and Unisa 2015; Das and Desai 2003; Jeffery and Basu 1996). The research and practice informing girls' education often assumes that schooling produces an empowered individual that can use her (new) knowledge and skills to achieve these societal benefits and create change (Vavrus 2002). Yet, most feminists regard empowerment as a process that requires attending to relevant social norms and structures that disempower girls and women along various social statuses (Kabeer 1999), and simply participating in schooling may not transform patriarchal and caste structures (Shah, 2011; Paik 2014). In India, gendered social norms and structures are deeply embedded in a caste system. Dalit feminist scholars, those who take a caste analysis to structural change in India, argue that caste relations operate at an ontological level and are further inscribed through religious, kin and social practices to determine who is considered a pure or un-pure person (Arya and Rathore 2020; Ambedkar 2004). Caste is maintained through marriage practices that pass status through bloodlines; therefore, female reproduction (and production) is used to maintain upper-caste notions of purity, and lowered castes are relegated as being and engaging in un-pure practices. This is different from how class can change through participation in different forms of work and economic structures. Therefore, achieving girls' empowerment and transforming these

relations related to marriage, pregnancy and work must take into account how beliefs and practices support caste differentiation.

Sabharwal and Sonalkar (2015), critical feminists in India, state that “The caste system is based on the division of people into social groups (or castes) in which the civil, cultural, and economic rights of each individual caste are predetermined or ascribed by birth and made hereditary.. which is unequal and hierarchical. . .” (45). Therefore, the caste system affects all facets of life from community relations, to work opportunities, to inter-personal relationships, such as marriage; and importantly, these inequalities are perpetuated through bloodlines (hereditary) that maintain purity/caste distinctions. Policies have attempted to alter the caste system’s strong influences at a material level through protecting civil and economic rights, such as the right to education (RTE), by providing reservations for scheduled castes and tribes to attend school or obtain work. But norms, behaviors and values persist that not only affect girls and women in India differentially, but within different castes. Therefore, the framework used to examine education’s role in empowerment employed in this analysis considers how these caste and gender norms, behaviors and structures change or not.

Among the broad claims made about education and girls’ empowerment is that education has been effective in delaying marriage and pregnancy in India. Increasing education rates in India are related to an overall decline in early marriage among girls (Borkotoky and Unisa 2015). But this relationship is complex, particularly because caste practices related to marriage govern purity and respectability (Ambedkar 2004). Some literature in the Indian sub-continent on schooling for girls show that education improves marriage prospects (usually post-basic education) by increasing girls’ respectability, particularly for middle and upper caste Hindus and Muslims (Khoja-Moolji 2018). In contrast, studies of lowered caste women have found that more

years of schooling can reduce their prospects for marriage, often making them over-educated compared to men in their caste (Dyson 2019). Depending on one's caste, then, schooling can decrease or improve prospects for later marriage. But the focus of these studies is often the individual girl's/woman's marriage status, and more attention needs to be given to the effect that schooling is having on families and communities as they navigate these changes in marriage practices (Grover 2017).

Similarly, the link between schooling and contributing productively to society through different forms of work depends on one's caste and class in India. Caste relations specifically designate the forms of work for a caste, and Dalits have long been relegated to "unclean or polluting" occupations, including brickwork, sweepers, leatherwork, and weaving; all occupations that tend to engage young children as apprentices, or "child labor" (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 2015; Thangaraj 2016). Paik (2014), in her study of Dalit women over generations in India, shows how schooling is used purposefully to improve one's economic status and to shift caste relations in society toward greater respectability. In contrast, upper castes who are educated automatically garner respectability, which can be maintained through working in white collar, "professional" jobs. In recent years, India has seen an increase in women's participation in the formal sector. However, the relationship between more education and economic participation of women is complicated because these professional jobs are limited, and some upper caste women prefer to remain unemployed rather than working in professions that are "less respectable" (Das and Desai 2003; John 2013). In sum, schooling is used to improve respectability of Dalits (considered as "outcastes") by altering caste specific work and relations, whereas for upper caste Hindus, it is for purposes of retaining their caste and class status. Both Dyson (2019) and Froerer's (2012) work with lowered caste and Adivasi communities, respectively, showed that

schooling often produced contradictory results for these girls because they had aspirations for completing their schooling and using it to improve their lives socially and economically, but they also found themselves unemployed or under-employed in the informal and unorganized sector (Dyson 2019) or adapting their aspirations for using their education to available opportunities within the community (Froerer 2012). The contradictions produced from schooling result, in part, because social norms and structures persist despite policy changes, including reservations. Policies that integrate scheduled tribe and caste girls into school is insufficient to create social change if other structures and norms are not attended to. For instance, Ratnam (2019) argues that career counseling with a social justice orientation is needed so that lowered caste girls can better understand their opportunities and constraints, and how to position themselves for more opportunities in the labor market.

Given these tensions in the literature and practice on whether and how education fosters empowerment and social change for different groups of girls, the next section explains the research studies analyzed in this article.

### **STUDY SITES AND DATA**

For this article, we drew on two qualitative longitudinal studies in order to conduct an analysis of how participating in primary and completing secondary school contributes to changing these social relations. Here, time, as central to a longitudinal analysis, refers to examining the effects of different levels of education (and time in schooling) on girls and their families. McLeod and Thomson (2009) suggest that longitudinal analyses can be conducted with repeat interviews and with life-history interviews, the former showing how change occurs synchronously with the data collection, while the latter allows for understanding change asynchronously through reflection. The repeat interview study was conducted with girls as they

completed primary schooling between 2016 and 2018 in rural villages of one district in Rajasthan; the life history interviews were conducted with girls who had completed their secondary education in two districts in Uttarakhand.

Girls in both studies were supported by the same INGO that provided material support, a life skills curriculum, and mentoring to girls and their families to support them to continue their schooling, complementing efforts that the Government of India and the state governments have put in place to ensure greater school participation and completion. In Uttarakhand, the girls in our study participated in the program between 2007-2015, with some starting just prior to the Right to Education (RTE) Act being implemented. In Rajasthan, the program was implemented from 2015 at the end of their primary years to support their continuation to secondary school. The girls who participated in this NGO girls' education program and these two studies were generally from low socio-economic classes and Other Backward Castes (OBC), scheduled castes (SC) or scheduled tribes (ST), and they had been identified by the program staff as not being able to afford schooling; at risk of leaving school for various reasons after primary completion; or having older siblings who did not continue in school. In Rajasthan, girls were from rural or peri-urban communities and their families were from various OBC and SC castes (Gujjar, Jat, Regar and Bairwa were the typical). Girls in the Uttarakhand study were from remote mountainous villages, and were of different castes, including some of lowered castes. Nearly all girls had been given a scholarship to attend secondary school, without which they likely would not have attended. Most girls' mothers had not completed primary education, and only a few had a sister who had studied some secondary schooling. While the sites, discussed below, for these studies have distinct economic, political and social environments, the aim of this analysis is to show how

caste is implicated for lowered castes girls and families throughout their years in school. The unique and locally specific caste implications are beyond the scope of this analysis.

### **Schooling in Rural Areas of Rajasthan and Uttarakhand**

To achieve the RTE, Rajasthan has increased its budget since 2009 for education, and has implemented the National Programme on Education for Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL). The NPEGEL has been credited with increasing primary school participation in Rajasthan (Gupta 2013). Yet, on most educational indicators, Rajasthan is below the national average or is the lowest; for example, female literacy in 2011 was 52.1, and lower for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (Rajasthan State Policy for Women, 2018). The Rajasthan government has a state policy on women since 2000, and the Commission on Women runs women's empowerment programs since 2009 that support girls' education, and adolescent girls' empowerment programs (e.g., Kishori Shakti Yojana). Dalit social movements to address educational and gender inequalities have been less evident in Rajasthan than in some southern states, perhaps because it has an historical strong Rajput (monarchy) culture, with durable caste and patriarchal norms. There are notable cases that have drawn the movement's attention, such as the Vishakha case in the late 1990s, when a Dalit woman fighting to stop child marriage was gang raped (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 2015).

The social, political and educational history of Uttarakhand is different from that in Rajasthan. Uttarakhand became a state in 2001, but the region has had a long history of formal schooling, influenced by the British colonial period. It is higher than the national average with regard to adult literacy and it is also known for its higher education institutions. Still, the state is very mountainous and many rural and hard to reach villages have not always had good access to schooling. There are several national and state level schemes in Uttarakhand that have been

implemented to support education for all and girls' education and empowerment. The NPEGEL has been implemented in various blocks in Uttarakhand since 2003 and there are other state-run programs (e.g. Kishori Shakti Yojana; KGBV program) that support the empowerment of adolescent girls and women more broadly in society (Verma, 2016).

### **Methods, Data Collection and Analysis**

The two studies used in this article include repeat interviews to follow girls through their primary education, and life histories of girls who had completed secondary education. We worked collaboratively in the design, data collection and analysis of both research projects. As a U.S.-based, white, middle-class researcher (lead author), my approach is to work closely with Indian-based researchers to foster collaboration and solidarity in examining gender inequalities through both insider and outsider perspectives. The co-author is an Indian, a Hindi (and Konkani) speaking, upper caste, female-assigned nonbinary person. Several other female researchers, including women from Rajasthan who knew the communities, also conducted interviews. Throughout the study and analysis, we ask questions of ourselves and our research process to disrupt dominant perspectives on girls' education and to center a caste-based analysis in relation to gender inequalities. In this way, we believe Dalit feminist perspectives are useful for re-thinking dominant knowledge production that informs policy and practice, but we do not claim to speak for or about Dalits (See Arur & DeJaeghere, 2019 for more about the use of a Dalitbahujan feminist perspective).

The co-author led all data collection in the field, interviewing girls and working with other local researchers to conduct interviews. The lead author worked with the teams doing field data collection in Uttarakhand in 2017, and in Rajasthan in 2017 and 2018. After the interviews, we discussed the themes that were emerging, and the researchers wrote memos for each

interview. All interviews were translated into English by research team members from the Marwari or Hindi. We initially coded data in NVivo focusing on the program and schooling effects on girls and their families. For this article, we re-read the interviews and re-analyzed the data in line with examining the kinds of social changes that were occurring, especially as it related to kin and caste relations. We also analyzed the younger girls' data alongside the data from the older cohort to see how these social changes played out through participation in different levels of schooling. The findings section discusses how girls and their families made sense of these complex social changes, not as empowerment that is individually achieved by attending school or not getting married, but rather how the dynamics of schooling affect girls' relations with others, their families, and communities.

### **SOCIAL CHANGES FROM SCHOOLING**

Narratives from girls and their families illustrate the shifting social relations among male and female kin, community members, and castes with regard to the relationship between education and marriage and education and work. These social changes do not occur ubiquitously for all families in these communities because these regions in Rajasthan and Uttarakhand have distinct historical and socio-cultural influences and caste relations that affect these relationships. The sections below describe general patterns from the data and then use in-depth narratives from a few girls and their families that illustrate the complex changes from girls' continuation in primary school. Data from the young women who have completed their secondary education are included to show changes that have occurred through and after their schooling.

#### **Education-Marriage Linkage and Shifting Caste and Gender Relations**

Remaining in school has shifted the ways that girls and their families think about male-female relationships. Parents were concerned about greater possibilities for illicit relationships – both in terms of caste and gender norms, and girls were learning how to negotiate these relationships to ensure their safety within specific caste and gender norms. In other cases, parents maintained practices of early marriage to preserve caste relations but they also ensured that girls continued their schooling in hopes of altering class and gender norms. Rather than stark lines drawn between being a school girl or boy or being married, the data from these studies show that schooling is re-shaping the discourse and practice around attending school and delaying marriage.

#### *Continuing Education and Risking Illicit Relationships*

Most girls were not quitting school and they were not getting married early; their parents and they were committed to completing grade 12, if the girl was doing well academically in school. Continuing in school reflected a shift in how parents and the community made sense of girl-boy relationships. They supported more schooling, but they were concerned about illicit relationships. In the longitudinal study of primary school girls in Rajasthan, Megha and her family revealed how they were making sense of these changing relationships as she continued her schooling. But an intersectional and relational analysis shows that the concern regarding illicit relationships further reinforced gender and caste structures in new ways.

Megha's family is considered OBC and they live in a mixed Muslim/Hindu village. Like most girls we interviewed in her village, she and her parents said Megha would study until completing secondary school. Like other girls her age, Megha had little sense of a longer-term goal after completing school. She mentioned being a teacher, which many also said, in part,

because it is a common profession in the community. But she also felt it was important that she could perform her household duties as well.

Two years later (just before 8<sup>th</sup> grade) when we visited Megha's house to interview her and her mother, some remarks from her mother about getting married prompted a protest from Megha. She commented proudly that she, with another girl in her class, finished the year with the best grades. She stated emphatically that she wanted to finish with the highest score in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade board exams "so that my parents learn that their daughter is really good in studies and don't force me to drop out and [they] teach me further." Doing well in school mattered for most parents to continue to support their girl to go to school. Similar to other studies (Dyson 2019), if girls weren't doing well, there was more discussion of leaving school and eventually marrying. But for Megha, and many girls, they could use the argument that they were doing well and needed to continue study. Marriage was not usually imminent. Still, there were concerns families had that schooling would enable relationships between girls and boys, and between castes, as they moved through adolescence. Megha discussed these issues, reflecting the concerns of shifting caste/community relationships.

Interviewer: So, why is your mother so keen on your wedding?

Megha: I feel like she just doesn't trust me.

Interviewer: Doesn't trust you? What does that mean?

Megha: Like, she doesn't trust me- so what if boys are sitting around and teasing, she should know that I won't do anything wrong. But she doesn't.... Also, because our neighborhood is mostly Muslim.

Interviewer: So? Is that a problem?

Megha: Yes.

Interviewer: Why?

Megha: Because those Muslim boys use very abusive language and say strange things to girls when girls go out.

Interviewer: They only say that to Hindu girls?

Megha: Yes.

Interviewer: Not to Muslim girls?

Megha: (nods in no)

In this interview, Megha reveals a concern that her family has of girls developing relationships with boys, and particularly with those of a different religion and caste. In this village, as in others in our study, parents expressed a concern for girls' safety. Safety generally meant that girls and boys may get into relationships that are not sanctioned by the family/community, with the possibility of a pregnancy. Pregnancies outside of marriage are feared in the community, and for those working in girls' education programs, delaying pregnancy is a goal. So continuing their schooling to delay marriage comes in conflict with greater chances of pregnancy outside marriage. Megha's mother told us that she wanted Megha to have an education, but she also said that continuing her schooling particularly in a post-secondary institution outside the village, opened up more possibilities for undesirable relationships. The mother knew of girls from the village who had gone away for further education and had come back pregnant. For these reasons, she was adamant that Megha would not study beyond 12<sup>th</sup> grade, though she supported her current studies and did not plan for her marriage until she turned 18.

Megha recognized the contradictory space that results from formal education, a point that Dyson's (2019) and Shah's (2011) studies also show. Family members supported her continued

schooling; they wanted more possibilities for their children. Neither Megha's mother or father had gone to school, but they had put all their children through varying levels of school. Her brother completed 12<sup>th</sup> grade and then went on to college for a computer course; an older sister did well in school but had to leave in Grade 6 to take care of a younger sibling. Another sister, according to Megha, didn't do as well in school and left. Both sisters were married after leaving school. While the parents continued their commitment to educate Megha, still she felt that they were more concerned with "their reputation", and that a relationship with a boy would tarnish it. Girls seemed less concerned about these relationships with boys, and most did not talk about having a romantic or sexual relationship with anyone at school; they were not interested in being married at this age either. Megha, like some other girls, represents this resistant attitude: "I don't want to get married now". When asked about the kind of marriage she would want, she said: "Someone who allows me some freedom. . . meaning, they should trust me. And help me reform the society in some way- like straighten these boys up".

Neither the school nor community seemed prepared to address how these changes in girl-boy and caste relationships were affecting young people. Teachers and parents we interviewed did not talk about what constituted healthy and equitable gender, caste and married relationships. Rather, mentors in the girls' education program discussed how to "avoid" improper or unsafe relationships by staying in school, going around the community together, and supporting each other to stay out of relationships. But they did not discuss how to develop meaningful and healthy relationships while continuing in school with students of another sex and caste.

Life history interviews with the girls in Uttarakhand who had completed secondary school and continued their post-secondary education revealed how they negotiated these challenges of relationships and safety within these caste and gender norms. Girls who travelled

to higher education institutions and work often discussed concerns about “safety”. For example, Malvika had completed her Bachelor's of Business Administration (BBA), and was pursuing her Master's in Business Administration (MBA). She was staying at a girls' hostel within the campus that had strict curfew hours. She said she never imagined that she would be doing an MBA because her family members — her parents and three older brothers — were concerned about her engaging in romantic relationships and her safety in living environments that might contribute to girls' illicit relationships. She had earlier negotiated a conflict with her brothers over being in a heterosexual relationship, which had nearly inhibited her ability to pursue higher education.

During [my initial post-graduate studies], I was a little immature and I made a friend, like a boyfriend. So, I used to speak to him and my brothers didn't like it. Since I was living with them, they didn't appreciate it. They said that if that's what you want to do then we'll get you married to him and not spend on your education. So, there were many problems because of that and they told me to quit BBA. So, I used to think it was irrational, but then I eventually left him (laughs)... I realized there was no way I could get married now, and now I think, why did I even do that? Now, I have matured a little. Her family was especially not comfortable with her staying in a hostel for reasons of safety, and only came around to the idea when a female friend of hers who had studied BBA with her applied to the hostel and the program together. Indeed, college hostels in India are notorious for their strict curfews, which often close around 6 to 8 pm in the evenings, curtailing mobility for female students but not male students citing safety as a reason (Tambe 2019).

Continuing their schooling opened up possibilities for heterosexual relationships, as well as relations outside the caste and community, which in turn prompted young women and their families to develop mechanisms to uphold certain gender and caste norms to ensure their

“safety” and keep them out of illicit relationships. Indeed, as Malvika articulated it, being involved in heterosexual relationships was a sign of immaturity when her education was at stake. Most women in our study did not feel that their higher education or work environments had transformed in ways that acknowledged these changing gender and caste norms around interactions between young men and women.

*Being Engaged and Going to School to Achieve Secure Futures*

A different change in the education-marriage nexus was occurring for some girls in our study that were married in community ceremonies at very young ages in Rajasthan. While the families committed to a marriage relationship for their young girl, the parents delayed the ceremonial practice of *gauna* where the daughter goes to live with her in-laws and the marriage is consummated. This was usually done when the girl is legally of age to be married (or close to it) which also coincides with the completion of secondary and/or higher secondary education. These early arranged marriages represent enduring caste and patriarchal norms, yet social changes were also apparent in how families and girls saw these marriages in relation to their continued educational participation. In some cases, we learned the engagement had been broken because the family no longer saw it as a good fit for their girl; in other cases, the girl did not give much attention to the in-laws or the prospect of future marriage, thus positioning her relationship with the family to one of an educated person with aspirations to work or to continue schooling.

This mother from a village where most of the girls in our study had been engaged at a young age explained how she saw the marriage and her daughter’s education.

Interviewer: Is your daughter married?

Parent: Yes, in our community we get our girls married at a young age.

Interviewer: If she is married then how will she study? What if her in-laws disagree on continuing her studies then what will you do?

Parent: Even though she is married, we won't send her to her in-laws' place until she is 20 years old. We will continue with her studies even if they disagree. And if they will still not cooperate or understand then we will ask them to get another bride for themselves.

This mother's statement illustrates that while a local caste norm around early marriage persists, being educated in school was reshaping how this norm affected girls' current educational lives and potentially their futures.

Changes in how families and the community regarded marriage and schooling for girls were also present in the life history interviews from young women who had completed their secondary schooling in Uttarakhand. Five of the 25 women in our study were married, all after completing their secondary education, and four had pursued further education of some form. While their marriages were arranged by their families, with some consent or discussion with the young women, they also felt their marital families continued to support their aspirations for education and/or work. For example, Chandana's situation illustrates these shifting gender norms, while also maintaining aspects of caste relations. Chandana's wedding had been arranged quite quickly while she was pursuing her BA through distance education. Her family's financial situation had always been poor and her older brother was disabled and unable to support the family. Her marriage served to support the family and ensure stability for her and their future. She explained that she agreed to the marriage because it would help her family and because her husband and in-laws were supportive of her education and future aspirations. She said her in-laws encouraged her to either pursue an MA or be employed – both ways that she can support the

family financially and be respectable as an educated woman. In this example, schooling has contributed to a shift in some gender norms for both Chandana and her family, but this analysis also illustrates that respectability as a woman and within caste marriages are still critical to kin relations.

### **Education-Work Linkages and Shifting Gender and Caste Relations**

The primary school girls and their parents were hopeful that continuing their education would offer possibilities for paid work, and in turn, they would both improve their economic status and their respectability among different castes. But the caste differentiation in their communities likely could restrain these opportunities. The girls who completed secondary or post-secondary education found more opportunities for paid formal work, but also confronted caste and gender discrimination in their work places, limiting their aspirations for greater recognition and social mobility.

#### *Education, Class Mobility and Caste Stickiness*

Girls and their parents from lowered castes (SC, ST, or OBC) Hindu families in Rajasthan were astutely aware that education is important and necessary for improving their economic wellbeing. Parents hoped their children would be able to use their education to find jobs beyond menial labor that most families were engaged in (i.e., stone quarry, farming, construction or repair work). Parents and girls regarded education as potentially allowing them access to “professional” or formal employment, in which they could improve their social status. Parents said that they regarded education as important and “normal” now for girls to have better opportunities and work. This sentiment is captured by this mother’s statement: “if they study, they will get a job. . . I want them to get a Government Job or any other fairly decent job”. While they were hopeful and, in turn, supportive of their daughters’ education, parents were also

skeptical that girls in particular could find professional jobs. Schemes and quotas enable many lowered caste students access to government jobs and higher education, but many families did not know how to navigate these schemes or they faced continued discrimination (Ratnam 2019). At times, parents and girls noted clear distinctions between opportunities for OBC groups and those for SC/ST groups, as in this example where a parent from the *Kumhar* (OBC) community in Paner expressed resentment that people from SC groups got more opportunities from the government.

Parent: The Government should give scholarship to everyone. It's not necessary to give the scholarship only to SC, we all should get it. They also give to Muslims, and other Hindu lower caste.

Interviewer: But Muslims said that they don't get scholarship and neither do they get jobs.

Parent: All of them gets job but we don't get anything.

Furthermore, a few girls discussed certain patterns that suggested social differentiation between OBCs and SC/ST groups. Anita, a girl from the Regar caste (OBC) in Arbad, could not identify any challenges for further studies or education in her own caste but she felt that both girls and boys in the Bhil community (ST) and the Banjara tribes did not study much. She recalled a Bhil girl in her primary grades who was no longer studying, and she felt that it was because the Bhil community did not educate girls and boys. She also spoke about how they were expected to speak to children from the Rajput castes using titles that indicate respect and status. She was aware that interactions between different caste groups were not common, and that certain social markers distinguished OBCs from ST and SC.

Despite caste differentiation, girls and families across these lowered caste groups saw opportunities to improve their economic status, and they hoped for change in their social and caste status as a result of being educated. This possibility is exemplified in how Ria, a young girl in a poor peri-urban village in Rajasthan, and her mother, discuss her educational aspirations and future goals. Ria's mother is a casual laborer; of the Gujjar caste; and her father passed away a few years ago. Her mother sometimes worked under a government scheme; and her older brothers worked in a shop or drove taxi. She is the youngest and only girl in the family; her brothers all completed grade 8, but not beyond, though Ria said she planned to continue studying through Grade 12. When we first met Ria she was quiet and unclear of any future goals, like many other girls in the study. She knew that girls could become teachers or police officers, but she wasn't sure what is required to do so. She was aware, however, that many in her caste had not previously continued their schooling, though she said it is now changing. While she was still young at the end of our study (entering Grade 8), she was becoming confident in studying and aware of future opportunities, as she suggested that she could go to the nearby city to continue her studies after Grade 12.

Her mother had clear plans for her future. She stated that she wanted Ria to work in a professional job, not the kind of work she had to do. She was aware of extended family members that could support her daughter's education and work, saying that a nephew works in a hospital and could help her study nursing and get a job. Despite these plans, she added that if Ria didn't find such work, she was able to sew, a way that she could contribute to her family and income through at-home work. These aspirations, and alternative options, were cited by many other girls and their parents, though not all had the social connections to support education and find work elsewhere, as Ria's mother did. This case illustrates that parents and girls believed that their

education and work opportunities could result in economic (class) mobility, and also improved social status through being educated and getting a professional job. But the stickiness of caste relations also penetrated their aspirations, and they acknowledge that non-professional work may still be necessary.

*Professional Work and the Struggle for Recognition*

The study in Uttarakhand provides further evidence of how changes to gender and caste relations take form in the labor market after completing secondary schooling. Most young women in the study were working in the formal labor market or in professional, white collar, work as teachers or in private firms or NGOs, even while continuing their studies or after being married. These young women's interviews reveal how completing their secondary education and pursuing further education afforded them opportunities to work in jobs that would have been unattainable by their siblings or parents. But these social changes also expose continued disadvantages for lowered caste young women.

Kriti's and Ratna's stories illustrate their work trajectories, class mobilities and persistent caste limitations. Kriti's mother had been a laborer in a rural village in Uttarakhand for much of her life, and became a midday cook (at the school), supported by a local scheme to "empower" women. Kriti's five older sisters were all married and are "housewives". Kriti finished grade 12, supported by the NGO and government programs, and began work as a teacher – a job that is available to girls from her village who complete secondary schooling. But she wanted to continue her education, so she began a computer course through a private college. She felt this kind of knowledge was necessary for the types of professional jobs available to educated young women in her region. She secured an office job, where she said she learned a lot and her colleagues were generally supportive of her. After a while, however, she wasn't able to be

promoted in the private company because they didn't feel she "was independent enough; and that she couldn't commute with a car". Kriti, like many other young women in our study, found it easier to be hired in the private sector than the public because they did not have connections to secure public sector work. Yet, private sector jobs didn't eliminate encounters with caste and gendered behaviors. For example, commuting with others via bus was both a financial matter and a security issue within gender and caste norms. To be safe in her journey, she went to work with other women she knew so that she would be protected from any gender and caste harassment. Yet, using this kind of transport also constrained her from being recognized as independent, or perhaps, as a symbol of her social status and as unacceptable for a promotion.

Public sector jobs were elusive for these young women. To secure a government job, they needed to pass exams, and while they were educated beyond Grade 12, many young women felt that they did not have a high-quality education, and therefore, they could not compete with those educated in the city or from upper castes. Kriti's friend, Ratna, had applied to numerous government jobs, but she hadn't made the cut. In the meantime, she continued to work in a plant nursery that provided her and her family a stable income, but did not give her the social status of being recognized as a professional and educated woman. Girls in both studies felt that they did not learn enough or study the appropriate subjects to pursue further education and to obtain the kind of professional or governmental jobs they desired. They needed a higher level of English and other skills, such as computer skills; they also didn't have access to good college opportunities that would allow them connections or to be competitive for such jobs. Similar to Dyson's (2019) study, most girls in Uttarakhand pursued BAs through distance education, and therefore they did not engage with other students or lecturers, which restricted their learning and their social connections. Their limited educational opportunities are in part also linked to caste

and class, as lowered caste girls are disproportionately attending public schools (rather than private).

While being educated offered some pathways to professional jobs and to improving their economic situation, an intersectional and relational analysis shows that these women were not availed of equal recognition as an educated woman working in a professional career. Some class mobility was possible, but greater social status related to their caste and professional work was less attainable.

### CONCLUSION

The mantra that girls and their families often hear from government campaigns, teachers, and girls' education programs in India is that they need to study and they should not (and it is not legal to) marry until they are 18. But these families' and girls' reflections on formal schooling and its purposes reveal a much more complex set of social changes occurring within families and communities in rural India. Continuing their schooling was reshaping norms around delaying marriage, a finding supported by other studies in India (Dyson 2019; Froerer 2012; Raj et al. 2019). But in this study, we show how girls and their families face tensions from these new norms that implicate both gender and caste structures, and they struggle with persistent caste and gender relations that constrain new possibilities from schooling. Continuing in school brought a concern about changing social and sexual relations resulting from a delay in marriage. While gender and caste norms are shifting to allow lowered castes girls to be more educated than in the past, sexual relations and reproduction are still controlled by caste norms. The changing dynamics around when and with whom girls can marry raises other challenges within families and communities to "protect" the purity and security afforded by these caste relations.

A critical implication of these social changes affecting families, communities, and girls as they go through secondary school and beyond is that educators and those working with girls' education programs need to give more attention to these types of caste and gender relations that are changing, and how they are reshaping or reconstituting different oppressions. Even though social changes in gender norms and relations may be influenced by more schooling, they are mediated by the caste system that structures gender, kin and community relations. Therefore, research and programs focused on schooling, empowerment and gender equality need to engage in an intersectional and relational analysis of caste and community relations rather than singular attention to individual girls.

Schools and girls' education and life skills programs that focus on the individual girl, like the one in this study, do not attend well to these shifting social and sexual relations. From our conversations with girls and their parents, it is clear that these changing norms and relations are contested and unsettled. Yet our conversations with teachers and mentors suggested that there is very little discussion about these issues. The life skills program, and adults in general, tended to reinforce a mantra that girls should not marry until they are 18, with little to no discussion of what that means for caste and community relationships, as well as relationships with boys and other girls, before they are married and after. Life skills, career counseling, and sexuality education programs should include conversations with girls and boys about the kind of society they want related to gender and caste inequalities. They could engage with questions such as, how are gender relationships changing and how could they foster greater gender equality? How are caste relationships changing if girls and boys choose inter-caste marriages, or choose not to marry, and how might these changes contribute to greater caste equality?

Similarly, changes in the education-work linkage due to more schooling of lowered caste and class students, and particularly girls, are changing girls' aspirations, imagined futures and possible careers. Dalit scholars have long called for the use of education to shift caste and gender relations (Ambedkar 2004; Paik 2014), and it seems with compulsory schooling, these possibilities, and the tensions created by them, are more present. These studies show the possibilities and struggles that young women faced in relation to class and caste structures. Class mobility is not equivalent to changing caste relations, and young educated women experienced continued discrimination and constrained to engaging in respectable work. These changes and the arising tensions have implications for schools. Schools cannot assume that lowered caste and class students and families understand how their education can be used for professional work, nor do they necessarily know the processes and networks for achieving it. Furthermore, schools and community programs need to create changes in structures and beliefs about who can engage in professional jobs, and how to make such work environments secure and safe places for young women and men of different castes to interact (Ratnam 2019).

This article, by examining caste and gender through an intersectional and relational analysis, illuminates some of the tensions resulting from girls' education. Participating in formal schooling in India for lowered caste girls is not only about becoming an empowered girl, it also produces shifts in gender, kin and community relations. These social shifts are contested, and while they create some openings for greater gender, and caste, equalities, they also illustrate the sticky and persistent intersections of these two systems.



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