

Young Dalit Women's Negotiations With Education, Career & Marriage

A study of the experiences of Young Dalit
Women in Karnataka
An executive summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study traces varied ways in which young Dalit women in Karnataka confront structural constraints of caste, patriarchy and class, in negotiating education, marriage and careers. While recognizing structural constraints, the study pays attention to how women find ways to exercise agency. A central question for the study was to understand how concerns around education, marriage and careers impact socio-economic and political status of women, and their emotional and socio-economic wellbeing.

‘While walking to school everyday, I had to carry the shoes of other girls of my village on my head’, one of our respondents, said in the course of our conversation relooking at her educational journey. Even in the contemporary, when we celebrate increased enrolments of Dalit women in educational institutions, such recollections remind us of the everyday challenges and struggles that mark educational journeys. This research revolves around many such powerful recollections and the resistance offered by young Dalit women to structural oppression. We focus on the everyday negotiations that mark the lives of women in this study with respect to education, marriage and career. In this, we pay attention to their socio-economic and political standing, as also their socio-emotional wellbeing.

Adopting a qualitative approach, the study was carried out across the districts of Bangalore, Bijapur, Kolar and Mangalore. 80 in-depth interviews were held across the 4 districts with young women from different castes categorized as scheduled castes, who identify as Dalit. The researchers, occupying similar social locations to that of the respondents, engaged deeply with the politics of self-representation in scholarship as part of the study. The research adds to the growing literature in the country on the varied forms of negotiations carried out by Dalit women, exercising agency and claiming access to systems and mechanisms so far denied to them. Importantly, the study contributes to the knowledge system in the vernacular, Kannada, that focuses on anti caste, critical feminist thought.

Education: dreams, choices and opportunities

This chapter highlights young Dalit women’s negotiations in relation to their education. It maps what factors enable them to build dreams about their education and what factors act as barriers.

Limitations of dreams: The study shows that severe economic constraints that the women's families face, the lack of enabling services by the state, the patriarchal structures in society and the household, all create barriers to the women's dreams about education. This has forced the women to set low expectations for themselves. Many spoke of limiting their aspirations, and not being able to pursue educational streams and choices of their liking.

Lack of career guidance: Amongst the few who crossed 10th or 12th standard levels, being first-generation entrants in their families to college education, and the complete lack of formal systems for career guidance has meant the choice of educational streams without sufficient planning. Some of these courses have little potential to create careers with high remuneration. This study highlights how alongside structural barriers in imagining careers, researchers too have focused rather narrowly on livelihoods that provide a bare minimum in terms of monetary compensation. This study departs from the trend, and pays attention to the idea of a career and a line of study that women can choose out of interest and passion while also attaining economic independence. Further, the study stresses on the need for equal, comprehensive and formal systems of career guidance for all, which can have immense impact on the lives of young Dalit women in the different parts of the state.

Entering Higher Education: Tracing the journeys of several women who have made it to the university level, the study found that lack of guidance has adversely affected the dreams of women participants. It has also found that for some women, patriarchal marital homes show little interest in women's research pursuits, forcing some of them to give up work that they are passionate about as talking about these fields is taboo.

- **Gendering Caste in higher educational spaces:** The study also brings into sharp focus the various kinds of caste and gender discrimination that respondents faced in different levels of education, including in higher education institutions. Dalit women who are Research scholars, as well as assistant or associate professors, already a minority in the upper caste and male dominated spaces, have narrated instances of caste-based discrimination, contempt, and non-cooperation they faced from peers and superiors. The study shows that the subtle everyday discrimination and power dynamic inherent to it get brushed aside, such that only instances of suicide by oppressed caste students highlights the rampant casteism within higher educational spaces.
- **Prejudice among teachers and friends:** The narratives in the study point to the ways in which peers and teachers discourage Dalit women at both school as well as higher

education levels from pursuing their dreams. The absence of teachers from the same communities, or understanding mentors have driven some of the women out of the formal education system. Some women have spoken of the humiliation they have had to endure from the school level, all the way to higher education. Taunts with respect to scholarships and reservations, systems that enable their presence in education, have been detailed, along with how it adversely affects the mental health of young Dalit women.

Gratitude: Many young women spoke of their parents having dedicated their lives to ensuring education for their children, including girl children. They also expressed a sense of gratitude towards their family for economic as well emotional support. A considerable number of the women in the study, articulated the need to forego their own personal dreams of a life partner and leave the decision-making regarding marriage to their parents, in an attempt to convey their gratitude. The study points to the how young Dalit women perceive education as a privilege, and that they are unable to view it as their right due to continued societal inequities and their doubly oppressed position in terms of gender and caste.

Being left out of Higher Education: Building on available statistics on the numbers of young Dalit women in education and in employment in the state, the section focuses on the continued disproportionality in representation. It connects larger data sets with the narratives of the women who have been left out of higher education, making an argument for welfare measures to pay attention to disaggregated data in order to ameliorate the challenging circumstances that Dalit girls in rural and semi urban regions are in.

Negotiations: Many of the respondents who have entered higher education have spoken about the support systems that have helped them in the process. Some of the women have had to make compromises with family members and navigate difficult familial and social circumstances to be able to continue studying up to the university level to pursue post-graduation or PhD. As innumerable studies have shown, this one too points to how reservations in educational institutions have enabled young women to overcome the gatekeeping that prevents many from entering these spaces.

In Kolar, anti-caste movements and organisations born out of these movements, as well as class consciousness through left influenced organisations have helped young Dalit women claim their right to education and meaningful employment. In other districts too, the presence of

conscious and sensitive teachers in schools and colleges have empowered women to pursue their dreams within education. Significantly, many of the women participants have raised their voices against caste and gender-based discrimination in different social institutions, their negotiations taking the shape of resistance against oppression. While the study highlights this agential character of young Dalit women's experiences, a considerable number of women have also reported the lack of enabling tools, making even negotiation hard.

Career: dreams, choices and opportunities

In this chapter, women's narratives bring out how the idea of career, or dreams that women can foster about their careers, are contingent on their caste, sub-caste, education opportunities, government measures to secure equal employment opportunities, and on marriage.

From education to career paths: In this section, the focus is on the trajectory from education to employment among the young Dalit women participants. Here, we see that the lack of career guidance can result in women either dropping out of higher education and taking up jobs merely to earn a living, or taking up academic careers in fields they are disinterested in. We also see how the devadasi system precludes all possibilities of harbouring dreams related to their careers for a few of the young women from Bijapur.

Normalization of workplace discrimination: The respondents have shared their experiences of mistreatment by colleagues and superiors in their workplace. Some of them who have taken up jobs as guest lecturers have reported having to endure exclusion and derogatory remarks about where they live and hence their caste, with no regard for their talent and hard work. For others who work in low income jobs such as cleaning staff in commercial establishments or domestic workers, the discrimination is seen as an inevitable part of their daily life. Holding back salaries, poor working conditions, harassment by superiors are seen as commonplace. Some of them use the language of resignation or attribute their poor economic conditions to their *fate*.

Persistence of caste bias in higher income careers: Respondents who have secured professional positions with relatively higher incomes also suffer caste discrimination by men and women in their workplace. A few of the respondents narrated humiliating instances that have forced them to quit their workplaces without being able to raise a voice against the injustice in a formal manner. Young women who have entered academic spaces as

professionals also narrated instances of exclusion and facing discriminatory remarks in their residence within university campuses.

Negotiations surrounding career: While many voices throw light on the severe effects of caste and gender based discrimination in their workplaces, affecting their careers, the study also documents instances of mobilizing and organizing against such treatment. Workers unions, politically conscious groups, networking with NGOs and many times family support have helped women build solidarities that can aid in securing their rights. Many women spoke of the need for their self development and the growth of consciousness among the women in their respective communities.

Marriage: dreams, negotiations and realities

In the context of both mainstream feminist studies and Dalit studies that have not foregrounded the experiences of Dalit women in their analyses of the institution of marriage, this chapter delineates diverse experiences that married and unmarried young Dalit women in the state have in relation to their marriage.

Choosing a partner

- **Gratitude towards the natal family: the journey from education to marriage:** As the chapter centered on education has shown, young women in poor households feel that they owe their families for the freedom and support they have been provided to study and pursue careers. Many of the participants expressed the need to let their parents choose their life partner and have refused to harbour dreams of their own with regards to both an ideal partner and the idea of marriage itself.
- **Devadasi system and the idea of marriage:** In a context where women from the community have been denied the right to marriage and a marital home, the study has found that young women in Bijapur foster dreams of an ideal marriage. These dreams are also intertwined with the idea of upward economic mobility. However, in the case of a failed marriage, the stigma of divorce or separation is heightened for these young women due to the prevailing prejudice against the women of these castes. The participants shed light on the circumstances that prevent them from gaining economic independence and the need for holistic education in the region. The study stresses on the urgent need to make counselling accessible to the youth of the region and formulate

a model that can provide empowering education on love, relationships, marriage, friendship and sexuality.

Gendered experience of the question of marriage: Participants, especially in Bangalore, have spoken about having to constantly navigate the patriarchal expectations of society and family to get married at a young age. This demand for women to get married earlier as compared to male counterparts within their own caste has been articulated as the gendered experience of marriage by the respondents.

Compromises before and within marriage: The study also brings attention to the struggles of Dalit women within marriages, that have been largely ignored by academia and organisations alike. Some of the respondents have spoken about using higher education as an excuse to escape the demands of their families to get married. Some others have narrated having been forced into marriages by their natal families in order to ensure caste endogamy. These women adjust in marriages, even in failed ones, bear children and carry out their duties as wives and daughters in law. Many respondents spoke of marriage itself as confinement and as something that makes negotiations impossible.

Subservience: Participants have spoken in depth about the different ways in which men in their lives have wielded power before and after marriage. Dreams of economic independence, freedom and personal space have not been realized even after marriage as husbands fail to respect the importance of these aspects. Many of the participants of the research are sole-earners in their marital homes even if the husbands are non-supportive of their work.

Contradictions and varied voices: This section documents the heterogeneity and the intricate differences in experiences of young Dalit women in Karnataka with relation to marriage. Participants have provided accounts of natal families that encourage them to focus on education, career and a future that they dream of rather than insisting on marriage.

Inter-caste marriage - questions and apprehensions: Although inter-caste marriage is seen as a way of breaking caste hierarchy, many of the young Dalit un-married women participating in the research in Bangalore and Kolar confessed their apprehensions towards the idea. The fear of ill treatment by in-laws of relatively dominant or upper castes, hearing about the everyday struggles of inter-caste couples, have caused them to approach the idea with caution. Some others who are associated with political organisations, NGOs or political groups

expressed their strong will to find a suitable partner, irrespective of caste, who would respect their passion and the cause of anti-caste movements.

Conclusion:

Documenting the contemporary realities and struggles of young women, the study points to the varied needs of Dalit women in Karnataka, as well as collective and individual negotiations made by them. It brings out, with sensitive detail, how both older forms of oppression and newer hierarchies affect their socio-economic status and influence their dreams of education, career and marriage. It also traces their agential capacities and how they exercise it in the face of challenges, as well as the limitations they face in negotiating or resisting injustice. Overall, the intent of this research study was to provide a comprehensive account of the challenges and possibilities before young Dalit women in Karnataka. We hope to have started this journey, even as we recognise that each aspect covered in this study needs further research, analysis and action in pursuit of social justice for all.