



Girls' Education in Rural Karnataka: Breaking the Barriers

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This research paper examines the factors that influence girls' enrollment rates in rural Karnataka, South India. It begins with a comprehensive exploration of the historical context, tracing the evolution of this issue to the present day, and examines the current legislative and policy framework. The study then investigates the various factors contributing to the enduring disparity in girls' enrollment, including household chores, child marriages, parental expectations, and poverty. Drawing on insights from a range of studies conducted in this region, the paper provides a detailed overview of girls' experiences within their families and the educational system. By analyzing the various initiatives undertaken by both the government and civil society, this research demonstrates that despite significant progress, the implementation of key policies aimed at advancing girls' education still faces critical challenges. It concludes by underscoring the significance of girls' education for broader societal development and well-being. It highlights the profound implications of educating girls for the workforce, the economy, and the prospects of future generations of young girls.

Keywords: girls' enrollment rates, rural Karnataka, south India, education, government and civil society initiatives

Education is a privilege often taken for granted by many. However, in certain parts of the world, this opportunity remains limited. In India, particularly in rural areas, girls face the stifling grip of societal constraints that deny them access to education. Trapped in a cycle of poverty, these young girls must work extremely hard for the slightest chance of receiving any sort of schooling. This paper delves into the challenges that hinder girls' education in the region of Karnataka, India, arising from a complex interplay of poverty, family dynamics, gender discrimination, lack of government oversight, and abuse. The study underscores the urgent need to address these issues, as they perpetuate inequality for generations to come and hinder the country's overall development. This paper analyzes the key factors contributing to this gender gap and explores the critical role that government policies and civil society initiatives can play in addressing these challenges. This research also provides a comprehensive analysis, beginning with an overview of the current state of girls' education in India and then delves into the intricate web of factors contributing to limited access for girls. Moreover, the study explores the existing government and civil society efforts aimed at promoting girls' education and the effectiveness of these policies. Based on these findings, the paper offers suggestions to improve the situation and pave the way for a brighter, more equitable future for these young women and the country as a whole.

In the current status quo, many girls living in rural areas of Karnataka face the harsh reality of dropping out of school as they grow older. This phenomenon is of concern as it impacts these young girls' lives, influencing their job opportunities, family dynamics, and even the prospects of future generations. Initially, many girls attend primary school as they are not expected to shoulder significant household responsibilities at a young age. However, as per a case study conducted by Child Rights and You, enrollment declines significantly, with an 86.4% drop at the secondary level and a further 52.1% decrease at the higher secondary level, this corresponds to grades 10 to 12 in the American educational system (Nadaf, 2019). This decline is attributed to the mounting pressure on girls to fulfill familial duties, including caring for their families and

contributing to household chores, limiting their ability to continue their education. These are the expectations that have been set for women throughout history, in which men have predominantly held the power to gain education, secure jobs, and provide for their families, while women have been confined to domestic roles. Girls are often forced to leave school prematurely, depriving them of the chance to pursue college education and future careers. This creates many obstacles restricting girls in this region from exploring alternative paths and opportunities.

This reminds us of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the habitus, which can be defined as a complex set of dispositions, behaviors, and preferences that individuals develop through their socialization within specific social environments or social classes. Bourdieu's theory of habitus sheds light on how one's social environment plays a pivotal role in perpetuating the existing status quo and social inequities (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu argues that individuals from various social classes acquire distinctive habitus during their upbringing and socialization processes. This habitus significantly influences individuals' tastes, values, and lifestyles. Consequently, people often find themselves naturally drawn toward cultural practices and preferences that align with their social class. This cultural alignment, in turn, perpetuates and reinforces existing social hierarchies, as individuals with similar habitus tend to associate primarily with others from the same social background, thereby perpetuating class divisions.

In the context of impoverished families in rural Karnataka, many are exposed to customs that have been passed down through generations, which often undermine women in roles unrelated to family and hinder their abilities to pursue an education. The International Journal of Research in Economics and Social Sciences highlights that educated women in India were historically stigmatized and sometimes even considered social outcasts, specifically widows if they dared to pursue an education (Sahoo, 2016). Bourdieu's theory further posits that individuals, including women, can unconsciously contribute to this social hierarchy by conforming to established norms and authority figures, as everyone is conditioned by their own habitual ways of thinking and behaving.

These girls are surrounded by people who have all been brought up with similar beliefs, seeing this way of life as their only option. It is worth noting that the first school for girls in Bombay named the "American Mission," was established only in 1824, and similar developments occurred in other regions of India, including Karnataka, where the first school for girls was founded in 1870 (Sahoo, 2016). However, despite these advancements, a significant gender gap persisted, with 1000 boys admitted to school for every 49 girls. Although society has made progress since the 1800s, a substantial number of marginalized girls in rural regions continue to be trapped in this cycle. Take the case of Mahedevi, a resident of Bagalkot, Karnataka, who, at the age of 15, was in the 8th grade and excelling academically. Unfortunately, due to the cycle of poverty prevalent in large families, she was compelled to discontinue her education after the 8th grade against her wishes, as per her father's directive, taking on household responsibilities. She faced threats if she persisted in pursuing her education, with no support system or government policies to aid her (Ramanaik et al., 2018).

This paper underscores the importance of amplifying the voices of these underprivileged girls, as it argues that education is a crucial factor that can empower them to break free from the cycle of poverty. Moreover, beyond individual empowerment, an increased presence of educated women in the workforce has the potential to narrow the gender gap in employment opportunities and positively impact the lives of countless other young girls facing similar

challenges. Educated women can serve as catalysts for uplifting future generations, providing them access to more resources and opportunities to lead more successful and fulfilling lives.

There are countless reasons why girls living in rural parts of Karnataka are not receiving proper schooling. Some of the main constraints they face that hold them back from pursuing an education include, but are not limited to, poverty, familial and societal expectations, and school infrastructure. Understanding these challenges is crucial to developing effective solutions.

Child marriage is one of the most prevalent socio-cultural barriers, with nearly one-third of all child marriages occurring in India. Early marriage not only forces young girls to drop out of school but also exposes them to health risks, such as increased HIV infection rates and maternal mortality (Ramanaik et al., 2018). The tradition of marrying girls into different castes, as observed in regions like Bagalkot and Bijapur, perpetuates low literacy levels and high dropout rates for women, often linking them to the Devadasi Tradition. Devadasi women dedicate their lives to worship a deity and are exploited by the temple, leading to involvement in commercial sex work and brothels (Prakash et al., 2018). Sharanamma, a participant in the study conducted by CRY, was forced to marry at the age of 14. Consequently, she had to drop out of school at the request of her in-laws' (Prakash et al., 2018).

Family dynamics and expectations also play a significant role in limiting girls' access to education. Poverty-stricken families with uneducated parents often fail to recognize the importance of schooling their children, especially their daughters. A study conducted by the National Library of Medicine in 2018 found that 16 out of 36 girls in rural Karnataka were forced to drop out of school due to a lack of family support. Girls in similar households are often forced to conduct household chores that take precedence over their schooling (Ramanaik et al., 2018). The study conducted by CRY in 2021 emphasizes this reality, as it found that 46% of girls drop out of school due to household chores and other familial duties (Nadaf, 2019).

The societal expectation of wanting to preserve girls' purity and innocence in this region often forces parents to withdraw their daughters from school, leading to instances of kinship marriages to preserve family reputation. Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity explains how if one does not conform to what is expected by society, they are often undermined and questioned (Butler, 2011). These young girls in Karnataka are often judged by their neighbors, families, and all of society when they do not "act as they are supposed to." In relation to their gender being female, they are expected to dedicate all their time to family chores and duties, straying away from education. However, when a girl refuses to abide by the social norms and constraints imposed on girls in this region, they are either ridiculed, abused, or punished for not following the "order." This was the case for two girls interviewed by the National Library of Medicine. For instance, Sheela, who is fourteen, had her parents' support to pursue her education in the beginning. However, this changed when she was seen by village neighbors talking to a boy with one of her friends. This led to rumors that Sheela was misbehaving with that boy, leading to her father pulling her out of school for the rest of her education, although nothing was happening (Ramanaik et al., 2018). These girls are not allowed to talk to the opposite gender for fear that it will take away their purity. Unfortunately, this perpetuates the cycle of limited opportunities for girls to pursue an education.

Another factor contributing to low girls' enrollment in this region is due to the prevailing belief among families that boys have better employment prospects, pushing parents to prioritize investing in their sons' education over their daughters'. This bias results in limited opportunities for girls, who are often relegated to household chores or lower-paying jobs aimed at financing their brothers' education. In large families commonly found in these regions, financial constraints

also compel parents to selectively fund the education of one or two children, typically favoring boys due to their perceived economic advantage. Shafiqur Rhaman, the founder of Empower People, emphasized this trend by claiming “In this situation, they usually cannot afford education for all of their children, so people often focus on education of boys but not the girls.”

(Kendal, 2018). The unfortunate consequence of this practice is that girls are marginalized in the workforce, compelled to undertake menial tasks to contribute to their family's financial needs. As Dewali Deb, a teacher in India, pointed out, many girls are relegated to domestic labor, earning modest incomes to support their brothers' and male relatives' pursuit of higher education (Kendal, 2018). This phenomenon is perpetuated by the broader economic landscape of India, which fails to represent women adequately, thereby undermining parents' confidence in their daughters' future prospects. The dearth of women in the workforce exacerbates this cycle, discouraging parents from investing in their daughters' education. Data from 2010 to 2020 reveals a concerning decline in women's workforce participation in India, plummeting from 26% to a mere 19% (Mazumdar, 2022). This trend further reinforces the gender-based educational disparities that persist in these impoverished regions.

Hygiene-related challenges are another barrier to girls' access to education. Inadequate sanitation facilities in schools, as highlighted in a 2018 survey by Child Rights Trust, particularly impact girls during menstruation, leading to alarmingly high dropout rates, affecting approximately 23 million girls annually (Rakshit, 2021). Another survey conducted by the Karnataka State Legal Services Authority in 2019 revealed that a mere 63% of state schools have separate gender-specific bathrooms. This statistic means that nearly 40% of school bathrooms force both males and females to share facilities simultaneously, creating discomfort, privacy concerns, and safety issues for girls. The lack of private and sanitary bathroom facilities leads some girls to skip school during their menstruation, exacerbating absenteeism, which ultimately contributes to declining overall attendance and enrollment rates. To cope with sanitation challenges, some girls even refrain from drinking water to minimize restroom visits, while others face reprimands from teachers for tardiness caused by long restroom queues in nearby villages. Reports have demonstrated how in some extreme cases, girls have resorted to carrying their own water buckets (Ramanaik et al., 2018).

The challenges posed by the school environment also exacerbate the issue of low girls' enrollment further. In some instances, schools impose fees, even at the primary level, rendering education financially out of reach for many families. Furthermore, in regions with limited school options, the distance students must travel to reach school can become an important barrier. A study conducted by CRY revealed that 90% of girls in rural Karnataka are unable to attend school due to unreliable transportation options. Another pressing concern is teacher absenteeism, which accounts for 29% of dropout cases and severely impacts students' motivation to attend school and engage in learning (Nadaf, 2019). One significant reason behind the high rates of teacher absenteeism is low salaries. Many schools in rural areas lack the financial resources to invest in their teachers, school infrastructure, sanitation, and classroom space. Shockingly, a mere 12.3% of school funding is allocated to school infrastructure (Kundu, 2021). Moreover, the shortage of female teachers compounds the issue. This shortage not only creates discomfort for girls but also exposes them to harassment and abuse from teachers when they are absent due to family responsibilities or their impoverished circumstances (Kundu, 2021). A poignant example of this problem is Sharada, a girl interviewed both in 2014 and 2015 in a study conducted by the National Library of Medicine. Sharada (around the age of 14 years

old), who had to care for her family at home in Bagalkot and occasionally missed school, shared her experience:

I feel scared to go to school after missing sometimes... Our teachers don't distinguish between boys and girls; they just beat... ask me to stand in the sun... they used to shame me in front of other students... I lost interest in going to school and felt like leaving school (Prakash et al., 2018).

Sharada's absence was due to family obligations, yet her teachers showed no understanding and subjected her to both physical and emotional abuse, failing to differentiate their treatment of boys and girls.

The restricted educational access for girls in rural Karnataka is the result of a multifaceted interplay of socio-cultural norms, family dynamics, hygiene-related challenges, and deficiencies in school infrastructure and teaching. A holistic approach is necessary to address these barriers, encompassing targeted policies, active community engagement, and heightened awareness initiatives. This comprehensive strategy should aim to create an inclusive and empowering educational environment conducive to the growth and development of girls in the region.

The government has implemented several laws and policies over the years to improve girls' access to education. These initiatives have played a pivotal role in improving girls' educational opportunities in Karnataka.

The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 was a historic milestone in raising the legal marriage age to 18, thereby addressing the issue of child marriages. In 1950, Article 45 was introduced, mandating education for children aged 14 and below, providing an important framework for compulsory primary education. Kanathanda's 2017 article, titled "Karnataka to give free education to all girls till graduation," mentions a more recent development known as the Karnataka Girls Free Education scheme, initiated in December 2018. This initiative offers free education to graduate and postgraduate students in an effort to encourage higher education participation among approximately 370,000 girls. The scheme particularly targets rural families with annual incomes below 10 lakh rupees, which is approximately 12,000 U.S. dollars, thus reducing the financial burden on impoverished areas (Kanathanda, 2017). Additionally, in 2004, the Ministry of Women and Child Development, in collaboration with Mahila Sanghas, an NGO in Bangalore, established Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalyaya (KGBV) schools for girls in Karnataka. These government-funded residential secondary schools aim to address high non-attendance rates, especially in tribal regions. By 2019, Karnataka had established 58 KGBVs, with 27 managed by Mahila Sanghas (Nadaf, 2019).

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also made significant contributions to girls' education in Karnataka (Patil, 2018). For instance, Reaching Hands, a non profit organization created in India to further the improvement of public health within schools, has not only provided sanitation facilities for over 8,000 girls since 2018 but also offers educational grants and leads workshops aimed at raising awareness about menstruation and public health. These efforts have led to an increase in enrollment from 70% to 79%, with ongoing efforts to reach a 90% enrollment rate. Similarly, a branch within Reaching Hands called Girls Glory distributes menstrual hygiene products which not only promotes clean water and sanitation awareness but also strives to contribute to improving girls' overall health, resulting in increased school attendance (Patil, 2018).

The BhagyaLaxmi Scheme, introduced in 2006, stands as a pioneering initiative designed to both encourage the school attendance of girls and change deeply ingrained societal

perceptions about female children within impoverished families. In many poverty-stricken households, the birth of a girl is often viewed as a financial burden and is unfairly compared to the birth of a male child. The BhagyaLaxmi Scheme strives to change this narrative by providing much-needed financial support to these families. It is, therefore, actively transforming the perception of female-born babies as valuable contributors to society's future and prosperity. Under the BhagyaLaxmi Scheme, families with daughters receive financial assistance and health coverage of up to 25,000 rupees annually, which is the equivalent to approximately 300 U.S. dollars (Biswas, 2023). This financial aid is directed toward families living on or below the poverty line, with the intention of enabling access to education for girls and elevating their social status, recognizing their potential and providing them with opportunities to excel in life.

Despite these commendable efforts, challenges persist. Eligibility criteria for schemes like BhagyaLaxmi can be restrictive for rural girls. Additionally, policies such as Article 45 only mandate education up to age 14, failing to address the higher levels where girls tend to drop out. Enforcement of child marriage prevention policies remains a concern, with many child marriages continuing to occur clandestinely.

To comprehensively address these issues, a multi-pronged approach is necessary. This includes implementing education programs targeting families that can change traditional mindsets and emphasize the benefits of girls' education. This can be achieved by utilizing media and social media campaigns to reach families and children and highlight the advantages that accompany increased girls' enrollment in schools. Additionally, offering financial incentives such as scholarships and free education can further encourage parents to enroll their daughters in school. Another approach consists of building more schools in proximity to rural areas and improving available methods of public transportation, all of which are vital to address distance-related barriers. Robust child protection policies must also be implemented to ensure the safety of girls from abuse in schools, whether from teachers or parents. Some other initiatives that could be implemented include increasing the number of female teachers who can serve as positive influences, inspiring and motivating girls to pursue their education, and providing greater female representation in the workforce.

By adopting these improvements and engaging various stakeholders, including families, communities, educators, and the government, rural Karnataka can make significant progress in enhancing girls' education. This collective effort will empower girls with the tools they need for a brighter future for themselves and their communities. The initiatives discussed in this paper, both by the government and NGOs, highlight the importance of a multifaceted approach to tackle the challenges faced by girls in accessing education in Karnataka.

This paper comprehensively examines the limited access to educational opportunities for girls in Karnataka, India. It also analyzes the significant impact of girls' education on societal progress and well-being in Karnataka. It highlights the many advantages of educating girls, from economic growth and poverty reduction to improved health outcomes and gender equality. While acknowledging the potential risks that trailblazers who work to challenge societal norms may face, this paper echoes Irigaray's call for women to dismantle long-standing male-imposed limitations through collaboration and not competition. Irigaray encourages women to break down the barriers and constraints men have created to control them by uniting and creating their own language. The paper emphasizes the need for targeted initiatives to eliminate these barriers that hinder girls' access to quality education. It encourages governmental and non-governmental organizations to tackle deep-seated cultural beliefs, improve infrastructure, and provide financial resources to impoverished families. It also urges policymakers to prioritize collaboration among

non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders to drive the change needed to improve India, specifically Karnataka, for girls. By aligning efforts across various sectors, this paper posits that we can create an environment where every girl can thrive and contribute to the nation's progress.

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