

In Pursuit of Education:

An analysis of the problems faced by Female Students

Meghna Nair, Nikita Sharma, Nithya Srinivasan, Stuti Agarwalla

Introduction

Developmental concerns today are becoming increasingly focused on gender bias and gender inequality (Chakravarty, 1998) which make development efforts hollow without a more inclusive and equitable outcome. At the confluence of this concern lies the issue of female children dropping out of schools. The positive contribution of female literacy towards lowering fertility rates, infant and child mortality and reducing population growth has been well established and makes it a major driver of social development (Kingdon, 1999). The education of women heralds improvement in the nutrition level among children and health care practices. Yet, it must be borne in mind that the matter of female literacy is pertinent not just because of the positive social and economic spillovers of education among females but more importantly because of the opportunity education holds for them, like any other able individual, to lead a fulfilling and creative life.

Efforts have undoubtedly been made to bring each child, especially the female child under the ambit of education. Unfortunately, they have fizzled out as half-hearted attempts or pending goals. The sluggishness in the fulfillment of these goals has been due to inadequacies at the policy level of which insufficient fiscal support is one. On the 20 December, 2017, sixty economists wrote to

the Finance Minister urging him to deviate from the ongoing trend of low budgetary allocations given to various social sectors, including that of Education. Currently the Government allocates 3.7% of its budgetary finances to the Education sector which in absolute terms is nearly Rs. 80,000 crores. 62% of this is provided to higher education and a meagre 38% to school education and literacy.

In light of this insufficient fiscal support, the research project endeavours to gauge the extent of deficiencies in the schools visited by the female children of Delhi's urban poor settlement through the impediments faced by them in their pursuit of education. Familial background, involvement and expectations are analysed along with public services in the spheres of academics, health and infrastructure. The social fabric of the region is taken into purview through a small examination on caste and migrant realities as well.

Literature Review

The problems faced by female students have often pushed them to drop out from schools. Analysis of dropout statistics reveals a disturbing insight; dropout rates have consistently remained higher for female students than for male students (Choudhury, 2006). This skewed trend stems from social, cultural and economic reasons that are

generally seen as falling broadly under three categories: (i) family related reasons (socio-economic status, family size, parental education); (ii) school related reasons (infrastructure of schools, quality of teachers and education being imparted, academic performance, interest in school and school work, distance from school and security); (iii) personal reasons (onset of puberty and personal and physical discomfort arising thereof, extenuating circumstances like marriage, financial pressure to work) (Weber, 1989).

This matches with the results from India-specific studies. In a study of District Primary Education Programme it was found that “general household characteristics like income, caste, occupation and education level of parents continue to determine access, attendance, completion and learning achievements” (Ramchandran & Saihjee, 2002). Family is a crucial unit in a country like India which is largely deeply rooted in tradition. While it can be supportive and close-knit, it can also be pressurising and limiting. A study of female children in West Bengal revealed that the strongest factors behind school participation, enrolment and dropouts were household factors such as parental schooling, household income and father’s occupation (Sengupta & Guha, 2002). Along with these, caste and religion came out as significant determinants as well.

Other familial factors are the family size and the number of siblings. These factors become significant because a large family size could put financial constraints on families with limited means. Moreover, the need for looking after younger siblings has often come up in studies and reports as an impediment to female education. In other contexts, however, there exists another diametrically opposite relation between family size and education. Looking at the evidence put forth by Borooah, 2003 and

Choudhury, 2006 the negative relation seems to hold in the Indian context. A study in a north-eastern part of the country revealed that an increase in the family size by one increases the chances of dropping out by 1.7 times. Going by a number of empirical investigations in the country it can be concluded that larger families inflict more educational disadvantages than smaller families (Choudhury, 2006). These factors are likely to have a larger impact in the education prospects of the female children due to the gender bias against them in the allocation of the family resources which has been pointed out by various studies.

However, unlike the relation with family size, studies in India have reached inconclusive results about the influence of parental education (as to which parent’s education impacts more) on dropout rates among children. A study in the north eastern part of the country holds the father’s education to be more significant with the chances of student dropout reducing by 16 percent for every year’s increase in the father’s education (Choudhury, 2006). Similar conclusions have been reported by a study in West Bengal (Sengupta & Guha, 2002). However, contradictory results have been observed by Zeba A Sathar, 1994.

While family units still have some control over their monetary resources, there are nevertheless some social endowments that are beyond the control of an individual. Religion and Caste are examples of such social endowments and are significant determinants of an individual’s socio-economic status. Their relevance also holds in the retention of students in schools (Sengupta & Guha, 2002). Among students those who are Muslim are less likely to continue in school as compared to their Hindu and Sikh peers (Borooah, 2003). As per a study set in the north-eastern part of

the country, Muslim children are 1.9 times more likely to drop out of schools than Hindu or Sikh students (Choudhury, 2006). The argument provided for the increased dropout rates among the Muslim children stems from the positive influence of higher educated parents on education attainment and comes after analysis of the 1991 census data and the 43rd and 50th round of the NSSO. Communities that were able to reap the benefits of education earlier passed the advantage further down the line and in this respect the Muslims lagged behind. For at the time of independence Hindus were in a better position to gain from secondary education while the Muslims were waiting to catch up in literacy and primary education (Bhat & Xavier, 2005).

The often conservative values of Muslim households, believing that the female children's place is at home and should have little to do with education, have served as deterrents in their pursuit of education. This is reflected in the lower probability of female Muslim children in enrolling in schools, higher likelihood of dropping out and lower grade completion levels in comparison to those from Hindu families (Sengupta & Guha, 2002). Owing to social discrimination and atrocities born of the caste system, the children of the backward classes have also shown lower enrolment and higher dropout rates in comparison to those from Hindu families. A child from a backward caste is 3.2 times more likely to dropout than a child from a privileged caste (Choudhury, 2006). While the government has been undertaking various schemes and programmes to make education more accessible to them and engender inclusivity, discrimination still continues. There have been some improvement in their status but not substantive enough to make up for centuries of marginalisation and entrenched prejudices. Similar trends have also been

noticed in the case of tribal communities (Sengupta & Guha, 2002).

As per the data from 52nd round of National Sample Survey (NSS), the lack of interest on part of the child is the major factor behind dropouts among both male and female students with 37 per cent responses to that effect in both rural and urban areas. The reason behind this disinterest among students ranges over expectations from and worthiness of education being received. Parents discourage female children from pursuing studies because they do not believe in its utility for in their minds their daughters will soon get married and eventually manage a household only. To parents, by continuing with her education a female child tends to become 'over-qualified', making it difficult for her to get a hand in marriage. From their perspective, marriage may seem as a way of ensuring for the provision of the female child in adulthood and protection against financial risks. The social influence also at play here sees marriage as a guard against the dangers and stigma of pre-marital sex. Education is demonised for instilling 'non-conformist' zeal among 'impressionable' female children as well (Chowdhury, 1994). Moreover, seeing that the economic benefits of spending on the education of the female child will accrue to the family that she is married into and not the natal family which is making the investment also deters parents from sending their daughters to school (Sengupta & Guha, 2002).

However, studies and surveys have shown that the intensity of these factors lessens with the transition from rural to urban areas. This is likely to be due to the modernising influence of the urban spaces. Better economic opportunities in the urban areas also ease out the financial constraints and the improved access to education positively influences its attainment. Urban areas have a greater demand for a skilled labour force

which gives an impetus towards human resource development. This has been observed in an experimental research design in India which found that expansion in the labour market opportunities in the randomly selected area led to a shift in aspirations at individual and family level among the female populace there. Girls there, between the ages of 15 to 21, had a greater tendency for enrolling in computer or English-language courses. Even the younger female children showed improvements in enrolment and body mass index because of increased investment in nutrition and healthcare of female children (Lives, 2015). As per the data from 52nd round of National Sample Survey (NSS) which highlights the reasons behind female children dropping out of schools, 'Parents not interested in studies' affect 17 per cent and 11 per cent female children in rural and urban areas respectively. This goes to show the increased interest and importance of education among parents and further supports the argument of the modernising influence of urban areas. However, 5.6 per cent of female children quit their education due to financial constraints and the need to supplement the family income in urban areas. A probable underlying cause for this is greater avenues for getting employment and incentivising relatively higher wage in urban than in rural areas. A higher proportion of female children get absorbed in domestic duties than the male children in rural (6.7 per cent) and urban (6.3 per cent) areas. This fall in percentages from rural to urban areas potentially points to a more equitable treatment of children in urban areas which come with modern values.

Familial fears and expectations are a part of the social fabric which changes at its own pace but access to quality education is dependent on the policy structure and reach which changes with governments. A study on a large Indian database constructed by

National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER) led to the observation that while only 11 per cent children lived in villages without a primary school, 30 per cent resided in villages with or without a middle school (Borooah, 2003). Distance from school translates into distance from education. In the remote parts of the country, children have to walk for hours over kilometers to reach their school. This daily travel not only has a high opportunity cost in terms of the help that they could have provided in the domestic chores but also exerts them to the extent that they become unable or even frustrated to prepare for their lessons at home. For the female children this problem gets compounded with additional security concerns. For them a longer journey from home means a greater risk of sexual assault on the way and this, regrettably, comes as no surprise given India's unfortunate infamy for not having a completely safe environment for women.

Female students have also expressed a fear of bathrooms (if they are there) which have not been gender-segregated. To them it puts them at a vulnerable spot and prone to bullying and harassment from fellow male students and to avoid this they often miss school while menstruating (Lives, 2015). Sometimes due to lack of availability of pad/cloth in school, female children often go back to their homes and simply not come back. There is an absence of dialogue and a certain stigmatisation around menstruation which makes it difficult for adolescent girls to physically and mentally deal with this natural process. In the absence of a support system at school or particular encouragement at home, female children often dropout after hitting puberty.

Security and distance couple with infrastructural inadequacies and qualitative deficiencies of the government schools to further disenchant female children from

pursuing education. With priorities skewed towards enrolment than functioning, government schools continue to remain plagued with teacher absenteeism and under-qualification, insufficient sanitation and crumbling infrastructure.

Female children have to encounter additional social, economic, cultural, logistical, and attitudinal hurdles in their pursuit of education. They have to fight not only with the ideals of a patriarchal society, but also their spirit which would die without any form of encouragement. Family is centric to most of the constraints preventing female children from pursuing education. Family size has a direct relationship with the dropout rate in the Indian context, while income varies inversely. Parental education has shown to play a definite role. However, results have been inconclusive with regard to which parent (the mother or the father) has the greater role to play. Family's social standing in the caste hierarchy, religious outlook, and orthodox expectations are significant impediments to the access of education for the female children. Educational attainment is also prevented by security concerns and distance from schools. The inadequate infrastructure, teacher absenteeism and poor quality of education being imparted act as discouraging elements as well. These are the major factors which nip the potential of the female children in the bud by prompting their dropping out of schools.

Research Research Question

An analysis of the socio economic factors affecting female education in urban poor settlements in Delhi

1. Does parental education have a relationship with the child's academic performance?

2. Does domestic involvement act as a deterrent to school education in case of females?
3. Does menstruation act as a barrier in the pursuit of education amongst the poor?
4. How do family expectations affect the attainment of education among girls?

Research Methodology

The research was based on primary data collection and analysis. 70 female children of the age group 8-18 years were surveyed and interviewed on their familial and social background, school facilities and their satisfaction with them, in order to identify the most influential factors impeding their education.

This particular age group was chosen, in cognizance of the fall in school participation and enrollment at the onset of puberty as widely suggested by the existing literature. Five urban poor settlements of North Delhi were visited and the households in each community were chosen randomly in order to prevent any form of selection bias. The respondents included enrolled students and dropouts residing in Sanjay Basti (Timarpur), Nirankari Basti (Mukherjee Nagar), Lalbagh (Azadpur), Samaypur Badli and Daka (Outram Lanes).

The respondents were asked questions from a survey questionnaire which consisted of both closed and open ended questions. They were questioned on a wide spectrum of topics ranging from family's social and economic standing income, parental influence, school infrastructure, menstrual health and hygiene, academic performance among others. Moreover, even parents were interviewed in order to see the effect of factors such as family attitude and expectations.

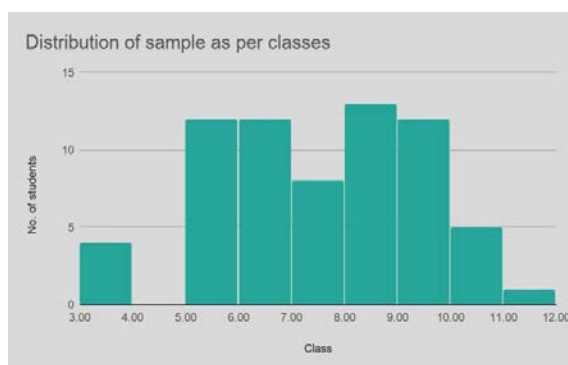
The study adopts both quantitative as well as a qualitative approach for the analysis. Quantitative approach is necessary to be able to provide a value/range for each observation which is further necessary in order to invoke useful and detailed comparison. Further qualitative approach has been incorporated in order to account for the diversity of responses that could be found.

Limitations

The survey takes a small sample size of 70 respondents and that too only in a particular section of the city (North Delhi) which may prevent generalisation of the results obtained. Further, as this survey was based on self-reporting there may be chances of underreporting and recall bias. In some cases the parents were not available. Hence, the family perception/attitude questions were discussed with the respondents. There is a chance that the results would have been different if parents had been questioned in such cases.

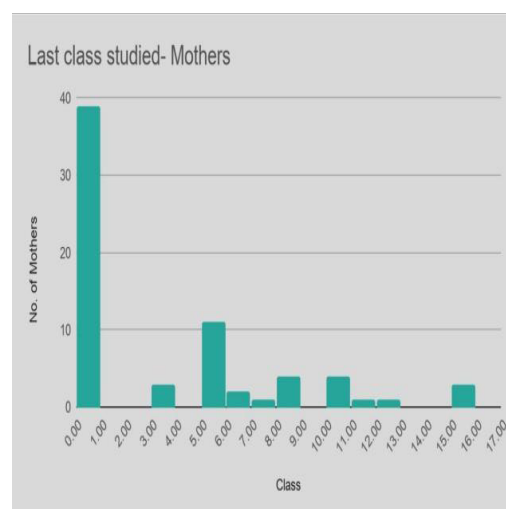
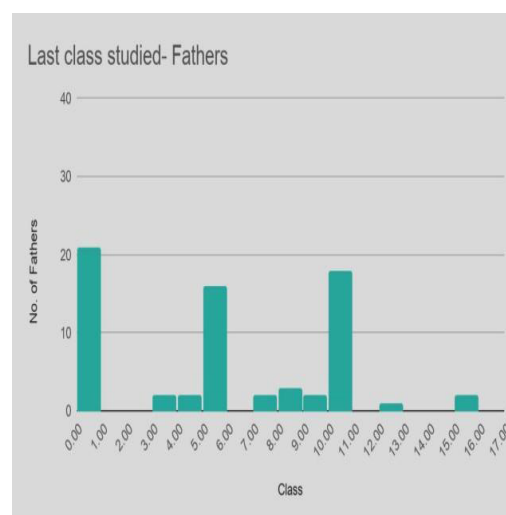
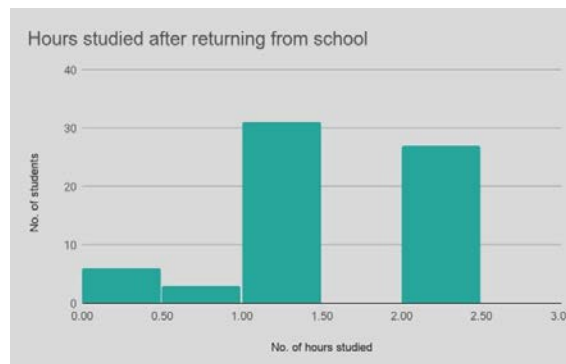
Analysis

Family



The sample had girls studying in grades varying from the 3rd grade to the 12th. However, in light of the increasing diligence

demanded by higher grades, there does not seem to be much variation in the hours put in by them to study, which was mostly one and at most two.



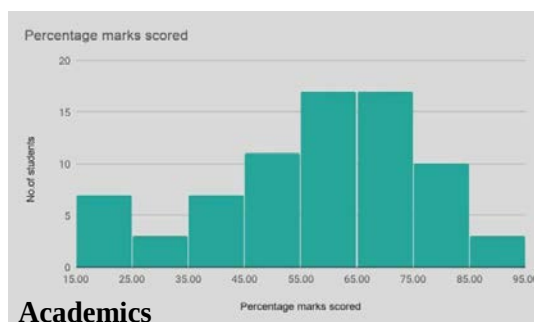
The modal family size was 5 with most girls having at least one younger sibling. While only 13% of respondents' father were not bringing any income to the family, 36% of the mothers had sought to contribute to the family income by seeking employment as domestic aids, factory workers, among other vocations. It is encouraging to note that these young women aspire to succeed beyond their mothers' profession with Teacher, Doctor and Police officer being the most common aspirations.

Fathers had shown a more continued pursuit of education than mothers. However, when it comes to university level education, a roughly equal share of both the sets of parents had completed it (2.8% fathers and 4.2% mothers). The number of mothers who had never been enrolled in schools was twice that of the number of fathers. The trends of parental education show two distinct stages when most dropouts occur; after classes 5th and 10th. It must be noted that the 5th grade marks the end of primary education and the further pursue of education requires a change of school in most instances; the completion of 10th grade marks matriculation. While the graphs show fewer share of mothers dropping out at both the stages, it must be borne in mind that this share is small because a far reduced share of mothers have reached this stage.

A majority of the respondents were unaware of the reasons behind their mother's discontinuing education. Of the known reasons, marriage was the most popular and was followed by disinterest in studies. 60% of the dropouts sampled did not make the decision to discontinue their education on their own with the most common reason pertaining to Family. This relation also corresponds with that of the mothers. The other reasons include personal illness and poor academic performance. None of the

dropouts were married or about to be married at the time of the survey and only 10% of them were working. Another significant trend among the respondents who have dropped out is that a majority (40%) of them have done so at the completion of their 10th grade. This partially mirrors the dropout trends displayed by their parents' generation where the incidence of discontinuation of education showed a spike after 5th and 10th class.

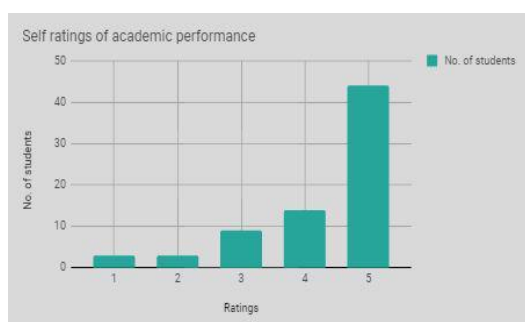
The sampled data harks back to the known bias towards male education with fewer fathers not being ever enrolled in schools than mothers and more sustained continuation in school among fathers. Interestingly, a close percentage of both the sets of parents reached university level education.



The marks obtained by the students showed a significant variation with modal marks centering at 60. However, the self-rating startlingly skewed towards 5; a large share of the respondents came across as extremely satisfied, even happy, with their performance, however poor. This is probably indicative of the low expectations and underestimation of their own potential.

This wave of contentment even spread to the perceptions of teacher effectiveness with only 8% displaying outright dissatisfaction and rating their teachers as 1 and 2 on a scale of The teachers were also largely reported as being serious and regular about

their responsibilities, which was in sharp contrast to the teacher absenteeism strongly suggested by the existing literature. Only 11.4% of the female students were unsatisfied with the education being received at school.

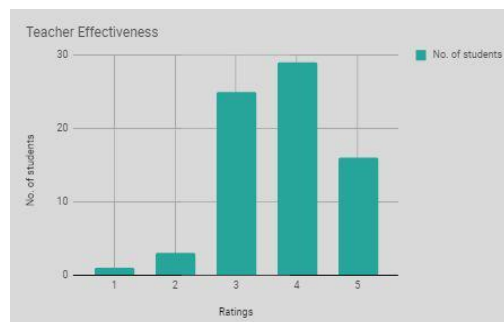


None of the respondents reported discrimination academic performance. No instances of bullying non-teaching staff and fellow students were reported on grounds of gender, caste and or harassment by teaching or

Travel

All the urban poor settlements visited had a public school in them. The respondents, who were also the residents of these settlements, were not faced with a commuting distance of more than a kilometer. Majority of the students, thus, comfortably walked to school with only a 13% of the respondents hiring a rickshaw to reach their respective schools. The modal daily cost of commuting through a paid rickshaw has come out as INR 30. Apart from this, 27% the respondents reported other financial cost pertaining to the expenses incurred in the payment of the school uniforms and textbooks as in the cases where some scholarship was given to the students to buy them, it was not sufficient. These combined overhead costs amounted between INR 1000-1500 annually which is a significant amount in households of urban poor

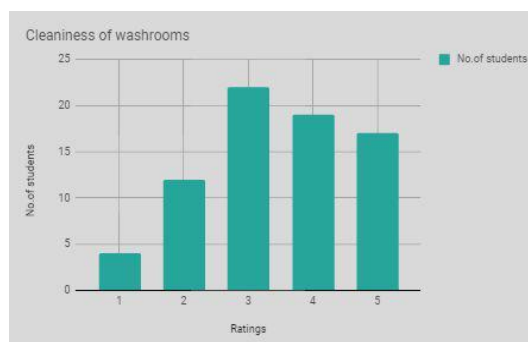
settlements that have a monthly modal earning of INR 5000.



While only 12% of the respondents travelled alone to schools and 29% were accompanied by their elders, all students reported feeling safe during their commute to school. However, 7% of them have also claimed to be eve teased, at least once, on the way.

Infrastructure

All the respondents reported adequate and satisfactory seating arrangement along with drinking water facilities, science labs and libraries. 21.4% of the female students were not receiving midday meals in the school. However, this could also be because some of the respondents were not in elementary schools that come under the purview of RTE 2009 which mandates the provision of midday meals in schools.



Arguably the most important aspect of infrastructure, especially in the case of female students, is toilets. The number of toilets was resoundingly adequate and separate for female students. While the ratings of the toilets weigh towards moderate satisfaction, a whopping 68.6% of the respondents reported not using the toilet in times of need owing to its stench and dirty state.

Health

Contrary to the prevailing trends in the existing literature pointing to the discontinuation in education after hitting puberty among female students, the research revealed it as not a major deterrent to the pursuit of education.

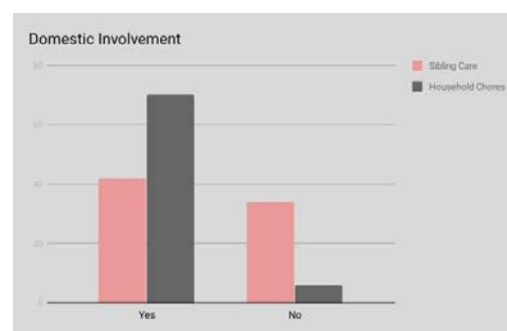
Two encouraging observations were that most of the respondents interviewed were using sanitary napkins provided by the school and these were also available at their school's medical room in case of emergencies. However, 20% of the respondents reported that pads were unavailable in the medical rooms when needed. 47.1% of the students reported that they did nothing on experiencing pain and only 10% took medication. One particular government school in Timarpur had its students report that its medical infirmary no longer kept pads and students had to carry their own at all times.

In most cases, menstruation was not found to significantly hamper the respondents' lives at school or home as the female children reported walking to school and carrying out all their activities, academic and domestic, just the same. In case they experienced any pain while they were in school, menstrual or otherwise, they found it comfortable to turn to their teachers, who they said have always helped them out.

None of the students reported any event of being shamed by either their teachers or fellow students in case they were sick or found their uniforms stained with blood.

In case of major health conditions, schools immediately contacted the parents/ local available guardian of the student and have them taken home. A medical room, as mentioned above, is always available and the nurse in charge is reported to be approachable and friendly.

Domestic Involvement



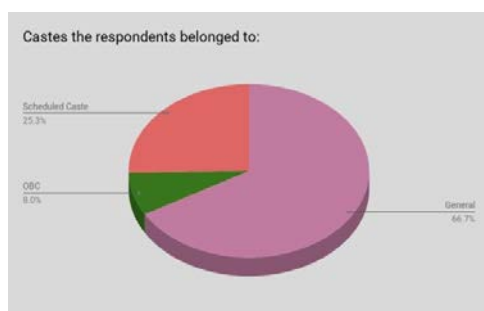
The graph illustrates the active involvement of the respondents in domestic chores with 70% of the respondents capable of cooking an entire meal. This percentage reached 100 in the cases where the mothers were working. 83% of them, a huge majority, did not believe that this came in the way of their studies. This is interesting to note considering that the majority of these same young women believed that they could perform better had they been given more time to study at home. Therefore, to be domestically involved is an inescapable aspect of gender role for these female children. So, even if only 17% students admitted to domestic chores hindering their academic performance, this is merely because it is not a trade off any of them think they can make.

Caste

A majority of children, 66.7% of them, belong to General, unreserved castes; 25.3% to Scheduled Castes and a meagre 8% (which also includes the muslim respondents) to Other Backward Classes.

While the families belonging to the same caste tended to cluster around different sections of the bastis, this segmented social relations did not extend to the female children interviewed. Not only did friend circles include a variety of castes, children of different religions too, were found to be good friends.

However, we did note one particular unreserved Muslim family that sent it's young to only the local Madrasa. Most children could not point out their specific caste which leads us to believe that caste based awareness is less prevalent among the young. The same did not report of any caste based discrimination at school or among their peers. However, what children were aware of was whether their families could avail of a reservation or not.



Most of the respondents had been born and raised in Delhi and very few were migrants. Those who had migrated had done so at a very young age which does not leave much to base an analysis on.

Expectations and Hopes

In the sample of 8-18 year olds, the dominant expectation from the young women is to study with 14.3% of the respondents reporting facing family pressure to get married but none to work. At the time of the survey, only 7% of them were working with a majority being engaged in family enterprises such as shops and carts. Others were employed as househelps and earning INR 1200 on average.

The respondent's modal expectation of the age of marriage is 20 years. This is 5 years more than the modal age of marriage among the mothers. This is in touch with the trends observed in developing economies wherein the expected age of marriage is being pushed forward with the female children staying in schools longer. This retention in school has been bolstered by the importance of education among parents. In our sample, 97.1% of the parents find the education of their daughters worthwhile and 91.5% find it satisfactory. The existing literature suggests that parents did not encourage their daughters to pursue education as according to them it would lower their probabilities of getting a suitable hand in marriage and the benefits of education would accrue to the in-laws' family. However, 77.2% of the parents maintained that their daughter would get a better hand in marriage with better education and 95.8% believed that education would enhance their daughter's future earning capacity.

Key Findings

- The parents' generation showed spikes in dropouts at the completion of 5th and 10th standards. The dropouts partially mirror this pattern

with a majority of them occurring after class 10th.

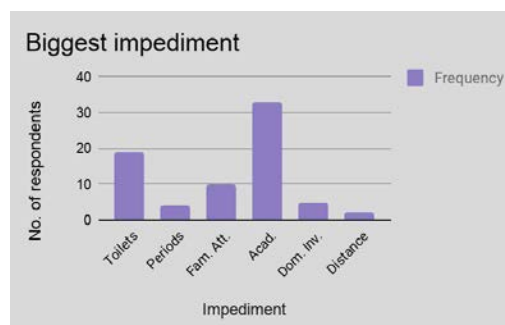
- An indication of low expectation from self in terms of academic performance.
- All urban poor settlements had a public school less than a kilometre away and travel to school was safe and easy.
- The amount received for the purchase of books and uniforms falls short of their full cost.
- Menstruation did not come up as a particular deterrent to the pursuit of education.
- Involvement in domestic chores increases noticeably when the mother goes out to work.

Policy suggestions

- **Awareness campaigns on vocations and career counseling-** The young women were aspirational with 91.4% wanting to resign themselves to just a domestic life. Such campaigns would go a long way in giving them a direction and concrete knowledge of what they need to fulfill their dreams.
- **Vouchers for uniforms and textbooks-** Since the subsidy provided for the purchase of uniforms and textbooks often fell short and significantly ate into a household's expenditure, a voucher system is suggested. Through this a student would only have to provide the voucher at the time of purchase and the retailer can later seek reimbursement from the appropriate government.
- **Awareness campaigns on menstrual health and hygiene-** The inaction towards assuaging menstrual pain by

nearly half the respondents requires awareness drives to spread information on available medication and dispel the myths surrounding them as well.

Conclusion



This research aimed at finding the effect of various socio-economic factors on female education in the urban poor settlements of Delhi. With a school in almost every settlement, access(Distance) to education did not come across as a significant obstacle. However, its quality and interaction with the teachers(Acad.) came across as the most common deterrent. Unhygienic toilets and poor sanitation, especially once these girls have attained puberty, poses as the second biggest challenge. Family pressure to work, get married or assist in domestic chores (Fam. Att and Dom. Inv.), were the third most noticeable impediment. Interestingly, menstruation(Periods) was the least troublesome factor.

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