

Article

Socioeconomic Fault Lines Navigating the Educational Challenges Faced by Marginalized Adolescent Girls

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 lockdown has exacerbated educational disparities, particularly for marginalized adolescent girls. This study explores the complex challenges faced by Kajal, Reema, and Priya, aged 14 to 17, in Tihar Gaon, West Delhi. These girls grapple with domestic responsibilities, socioeconomic constraints, and exploitative social dynamics that hinder their educational and personal development. Kajal's narrative reveals the oppressive nature of early marriages and financial manipulation, where Chachaji's exorbitant loans perpetuate a cycle of exploitation and educational marginalization. Despite completing her 12th grade, Kajal's socio-economic conditions and malnourished state impede her pursuit of higher education, reflecting a grim reality for many girls in similar situations. Reema's story highlights the detrimental impact of dowry culture, which forces families to prioritize financial savings over girls' education. Her aspirations for vocational jobs are stifled by economic barriers, and rigid social hierarchies between employer and employee families further restrict her personal growth. Priya's account underscores the pervasive inequalities within her community, where delayed salaries, workplace mistreatment, and a lack of financial control perpetuate instability. The COVID-19 pandemic further severed their ties with education, amplifying existing challenges. The study underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to dismantle systemic barriers and promote individual empowerment. Education, while a fundamental right, often becomes a source of frustration due to structural inequalities. Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires a holistic approach, including financial literacy, awareness of scholarships, and supportive educational environments. The narratives of Kajal, Reema, and Priya highlight the imperative to break free from cycles of exploitation and ensure equal educational opportunities for all girls, enabling them to realize their full potential.

Keywords: Marginalization, COVID-19, Adolescent Girls, Social, Economic

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 lockdown has undeniably cast a broad shadow over lives, affecting people across gender, class, and economic divides. However, amidst this universal impact, adolescent girls emerge as a particularly afflicted group, facing monumental challenges during and after the lockdown. The disruptions wrought by the lockdown persist in manifold ways, deeply influencing the daily lives, health, and overall well-being of these young individuals. Tragically, the repercussions extend beyond mere disruption, as a distressing number of adolescent girls find themselves dropping out of educational pursuits, coerced

into the grim realities of child labor, early marriages, and even trafficking, placing their lives in imminent danger.

This trajectory leads to a perilous journey of educational marginalisation for these girls. Marginalisation, a process entailing the placement of certain groups on the fringes of society, manifests in stark disparities in access to resources, opportunities, and representation. The consequences are profound and enduring, permeating every aspect of affected individuals' lives and communities. Escaping the clutches of marginalisation becomes a critical imperative for fostering social justice, equality, equity and inclusion.

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However, achieving this goal proves formidable, especially for subaltern groups occupying subordinate positions in society, often excluded from mainstream spheres.

Navigating the labyrinth of Tihar Gaon, an urban slum neighbourhood of West Delhi, New Delhi the lives of Kajal, Reema, and Priya aged between 14 and 17, unfold amidst the intricate tapestry of domestic responsibilities, family structures, residences, schools, and support systems. This exploration reveals the complex interplay between various facets of their existence, laying bare the harsh reality of how these adolescent girls are ensnared in a relentless cycle of poverty, grappling with limited opportunities for upward mobility through access to quality education. Meanwhile, the challenging backdrop of Tihar Gaon, marked by cramped lanes, dense population, and exorbitant rents, amplifies the struggles faced by the girls and their families. In this unforgiving environment, where manual labor and local store jobs prevail, particularly for females employed as domestic helpers, the issues of space scarcity, inadequate sanitation, and a lack of civic amenities further compound their challenges.

Most of Tihar Gaon's inhabitants hail from Bihar, with some also originating from Uttar Pradesh. Most migration patterns often mimic a chain-like sequence, as individuals seeking employment opportunities join relatives who have already settled in the area. This trend, is usually driven by trust and familial ties, notably characterised by the term "Chachaji," leads to a set of consequences for the newcomers. While these Chachaji's may outwardly display empathy and understanding of familial hardships, providing loans with exorbitant interest rates exceeding 30%, their actions often perpetuate a cycle of exploitation.

Despite the outward appearance of sympathy, these figures are known for subjecting workers, to strenuous labor, minimal wages, and delayed payments, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of exploitation that significantly influences the lives of young girls and their families. The displays of compassion serve as a camouflage, making it difficult for the girls to decipher the true nature of their hierarchical relationship and the adverse effects it has on their lives which not only renders them vulnerable but also exposes them and makes them susceptible to abuse and a lifetime of servitude. Furthermore, various factors such as economic constraints, cultural traditions, and limited educational and employment opportunities contribute to hindering young girls from breaking free from societal expectations that confine them.

In the web of fate, these three narratives emerge as poignant illustrations, representing challenges that entangle every attempt to break free. A perpetual cycle unfolds—a relentless downward spiral, an elusive escape slipping through their fingers like sand. Despite their yearning for emancipation, destiny cunningly propels them back to the starting line, where the pursuit of freedom becomes a perpetual, circular race against the hands of time.

2. CHACHAJI'S WEB OF EXPLOITATION: UNRAVELING THE COMPLEXITIES OF KAJAL'S STRUGGLE

Kajal finds herself entangled in a complex web of exploitation, torn between her abusive husband, Rahul, and the manipulative Chachaji. The marriage, founded on lies and deceit (Chachaji claimed that Rahul did not drink alcohol, earned 900/day, and owned land in a village in Bihar, demands no dowry), unravels when Kajal's father investigates the family background. He is misled into staying in a pukka house that doesn't belong to them.

This marriage becomes a conduit for financial subjugation, with Chachaji's loans, carrying exorbitant 30% interest rates, dictating the terms of their daily lives for both sides of the family. Despite his unscrupulous methods, Chachaji alternates between being a benefactor and a tormentor. He provides loans during dire situations, yet subjects Kajal's mother to taunts and ridicule for her inability to repay, stating, *'Yeh toh main tha jo paise de diye to tumhari beti ka ghar bas gaya, warna milta nahi tujhe ladka apni beti byahne ko.'*

The distressing situation takes a tragic turn when Kajal loses her child due to the dire living conditions imposed by their financial constraints. Despite the devastating loss, Kajal rationalizes it, relieved that her daughter escaped further suffering. (*sahi waqt par chahi gayi beti meri, warna data nahi kitna our paisa lagana padta our vo bhi kitna dard jhelti*). The entrapment deepens as Chachaji's financial control hampers Rahul's ability to seek alternative employment. Constantly criticized for being a "ghar jamai," Rahul becomes increasingly desperate, demanding dowry and material possessions from Kajal's family, exacerbating the familial tension.

While Kajal is cognizant of her husband's wrongful act of demanding dowry from her mother, despite her financial constraints, she still questions her fate. This mindset not only erodes her self-esteem but also breeds a sense of envy when she compares her life to that of her employer, Sukhmani. Kajal perceives Sukhmani as having a fortunate destiny, with a supportive husband and a wealthy father – a stark contrast to her own situation. Expressing her frustration, Kajal asserts, *"Meri Dhaak to usi se banegi na sasural mein ki mai kitna dahej le kar aayi, warna merko kaun puchega."* She further laments, *"Pata nahi Sukhmani didi ki kismat itni acchi kaise hai, ki unko itna pyaar Karne Vala pati mila, sasural Mei saare unko itna puchte hai jabki unko koi kaam nahi aata, aur mujhe saare kaam karne aate hai. Main sabse ache se baat bhi karti hun, lekin sab dutkaar dete hain, sirf isliye ki vo apne mayke se itna paisa le kar aayi, gaadi le kar aayi. Mai kuch nahi le kar gayi, toh na meri kismat mein pati ka pyaar hai, na meri beti ki jaan ki keemat thi kisi ko."*

The power dynamic is further skewed as Chachaji assumes a leadership role in reconciling the couple, pressuring Kajal to return to Rahul under the guise of second pregnancy. (*mujhy laga mujhe apne pati ka chehra fir kabhi nahi dekhna padega apni beti ko marata dekhkar, par shayad zindagi mei*

aur bhi dukh likhe hai iske sath.)

Kajal's predicament is compounded by societal expectations and her mother's regret over the early marriage, driven by a desire to avoid dowry during a period of financial crisis (*one less mouth to feed during the financial crisis in pandemic*). The lack of financial literacy within the community perpetuates a cycle of vulnerability, allowing chachajis like Chachaji to exploit families like Kajal's. The overarching theme of early marriages, lack of education, and financial dependence creates a pervasive environment of marginalization, trapping generations of women in a cycle of impoverishment.

Kajal, despite demonstrating resilience by completing her 12th standard exams while pregnant, now confronts insurmountable challenges in pursuing further education. These hurdles stem from two significant factors: her socio-economic conditions and the realization that education alone does not equip her with the necessary skills to secure a better job. Kajal's petite and malnourished stature is a direct consequence of her socio-economic circumstances. These conditions have cast a shadow on her aspirations for higher education. Despite her determination, she grapples with the stark reality that her physical condition may hinder her pursuit of advanced studies.

Moreover, a poignant moment arises when Kajal reflects on her education's outcome. She laments, "*Kya hogaya, padh kar bhi abhi bhi to kapde silna hi seekh rahi hun. Aage padhna chahti thi, vo bhi nahi kar paayi.*" This statement encapsulates the poignant realization that, despite her educational achievements, Kajal finds herself limited to acquiring skills that are not commensurate with her aspirations for a better job.

Her mother's fatalistic perspective echoes the bleak reality faced by women in their family, symbolizing the entrenched cycle of marginalization and exploitation that pervades their lives. The narrative exposes the harsh realities of those ensnared by chachajis and calls attention to the urgent need for awareness, empowerment, and societal change to break free from this vicious cycle of exploitation.

Kajal's family stands as a representative example of the widespread exploitation orchestrated by individuals like Chachaji. The insidious tactics employed by these figures extend beyond her household, ensnaring numerous families in a web of financial vulnerability. The dearth of financial literacy among the parents in such communities severely limits their ability to break free from these circumstances and pursue more favorable livelihoods. The resultant lack of awareness renders them susceptible to the predatory schemes of chachajis, who capitalize on their ignorance to perpetuate control. Additionally, the pervasive influence these chachajis wield within their communities often coerces families into submission, with some choosing to endure hardship out of misguided respect. Others, oblivious to alternative possibilities, remain trapped in dire situations. Furthermore, the entanglement is exacerbated when fathers grappling with alcoholism succumb to taking loans from these chachajis, perpetuating a distressing cycle of debt and

exploitation. The intricate interplay of financial illiteracy, societal influence, and substance abuse underscores the urgent need for intervention and empowerment within these communities.

3. REEMA'S STRUGGLE FOR ASPIRATION AND EDUCATION

Reema's situation to discontinue her education after the fifth grade was multifaceted, primarily triggered by her brother's expulsion from school. ("*Meri padhai bhi isliye chhodva di kyunki ek teacher ne mere bhai par paise chor ka ilzaam lagaya tha, usse school se nikala to mujhe bhi nikal diya ki ab school jayegi kiske saath.*")

However, an additional layer of complexity was added to her situation, as her family invoked the pretext of impending marriage expenses and the imperative to save for dowry, using these reasons to justify the halt in her education. The intertwining factors of familial challenges, societal expectations, and financial constraints converged to curtail Reema's educational journey, exemplifying the intricate web of pressures that young women like her navigate within their communities.

Her life is emblematic of the pervasive impact of dowry culture on the aspirations and opportunities of young women in her community. The fear ingrained in her about the escalating dowry with age forces her and her peers to consider early marriages, constraining their life choices and perpetuating a cycle of financial dependence. The perpetuation of the dowry culture fosters a belief within Reema that parental wealth determines the quality of a prospective groom. Despite harboring dreams of pursuing vocational jobs like working in a salon or becoming a mehendi artist, Reema finds herself constrained by the lack of financial resources necessary to afford the materials for such pursuits. (*Meri na ek dost hai vo na doctor ke vaha kaam karti hai matlab sir dawai pakdane ka, par sab log kehte hai ki doctor ke vaha kaam karti hai, too saab uski bhot izzat karte hain*) This financial barrier becomes a major roadblock to her passion for drawing, relegating her artistic potential to the sidelines.

The discrepancy between Reema's aspirations and the harsh reality she faces is exacerbated by the limited opportunities available to her. Forced into a role as a domestic helper alongside her mother, Reema's potential remains largely unrealized. Despite her artistic flair, she is unable to access the materials required for her craft. The interplay of economic constraints, cultural traditions, and limited educational opportunities shapes Reema's life, hindering her from breaking free from the societal expectations that confine her.

Furthermore, The rigid social hierarchies between employer and employee families inhibit Reema from seeking guidance, adding another layer of complexity to her struggle for personal and professional growth. The exploitative work conditions, delayed salaries, and a lack of control over her earned income further contribute to Reema's sense of powerlessness and financial instability. This sense of boundary and comparison towards their

employers is not one-sided; social hierarchies between the families of employers and employees, especially in the informal sector, are so tight that the employers often do not encourage giving them guidance. These young women often see successful women and aspire to be like them, but they are often afraid to ask for help or guidance because of social hierarchies and the fear of losing their jobs. As when they were asked what they wanted to become when they were relatively young Reema says *"Hume vaise didi jaisa bananna hai jinke ghar hum kaam kart hain, vo office jaati hai na", when I asked them have you asked how did they get there and achieved that in life, they said, pehle to daar Lagta tha nahi puchte the, ek din pucha, par unhone bataya nahi, upper se chup chap apni mummy ko bhi shikayat kr di aur kaha "ye hums karenge apna mukabala jyada muh mat lagao inhe.*

Reema's decision to discontinue her education after the fifth grade is a poignant reflection of the multifaceted challenges she faced. The expulsion of her brother from school served as the initial trigger, but the situation became more complex as her family invoked the pretext of impending marriage expenses and the necessity to save for dowry. This confluence of familial challenges, societal expectations, and financial constraints illustrates the intricate web of pressures young women like Reema navigate within their communities. Her life serves as a poignant emblem of the pervasive impact of dowry culture on the aspirations and opportunities of young women in her community. The fear of escalating dowry with age forces them into early marriages, limiting their life choices and perpetuating a cycle of financial dependence. Reema's aspirations for vocational jobs are stifled by financial barriers, hindering her artistic potential and relegating her to a role as a domestic helper. The limited opportunities available to her, coupled with exploitative work conditions and a lack of control over her earned income, further compound her sense of powerlessness. The rigid social hierarchies within employer and employee families create additional barriers to seeking guidance, underscoring the complexity of Reema's struggle for personal and professional growth.

4. PRIYA'S EDUCATIONAL BARRIERS AND FINANCIAL INSTABILITY

In Priya's community, her narrative unveils the intricate challenges hindering young women's access to education and economic stability. The prevailing dowry-centric mindset not only influences marriage decisions but also fosters a sense of inferiority through societal comparisons. Despite being grateful for their jobs, women like Priya face restricted mobility and dissatisfaction with their work environment. Priya's accounts of powerlessness reveal instances where women are unjustly removed from work or threatened when seeking rightful pay.

She recounts a disheartening conversation, *"Hum mar bhi the honge na toh kaam vali aunty kahegi, 'Aaj kaam karjao, fir mar jana, na humara sukh dekhte hai na dukh.'* Further adding, *'Humari galti nahi bhi hogi na, unki galti hogi to bhi humein kaam se hata dete hai. Kabhi Kabhi to batate bhi nahi hai, jaise agle din jaao na tab kehte hai humnein doosri*

laga li, tu kaam acha nahi karti thi.' Ek baar ese hua ki, humare paise the unpar hafte ke, toh humein bhi keh diya, 'ki dedo, humean kaha ki nikal jaao yaha se warna hum police Mei complaint kar denge ki humare ghar se sona chura kar le gaye hain, humein daar lag gya isliye hume gaye hi nahi, vapas paise lene.' She ends by saying, *'Bhagvan bhi dekhta hai'."*

Delayed salaries and unjust comparisons further highlight the instability and mistreatment in their workplaces. *"Ki paise dediye toh sir par chadne lagengi,"* as Priya once heard someone say, *"In jaise logon se kaam karvana hai na to paise rula kar hi dene chahiye."* Priya's revelation about the unequal distribution of food at work reflects the pervasive inequalities. *"Khana waste hojaye lekin kaam vali ko 1 roti se zyada nahi denge, mai bhi aise logon ke ghar khana nahi khati."* Furthermore taking leaves from school becomes a necessity, either due to employers changing timings at their convenience or facing salary cuts if they take leaves. Additionally, they must attend to household chores when parents leave for the village, or they themselves go to the village for around three months during crop cultivation.

Priya astutely points out that the outbreak of COVID and the subsequent financial crisis prevented them from returning to their studies. Furthermore, she shared that they lost touch with their studies over time due to an unsuitable study environment. Constant distractions, such as frequent quarrels among family members or neighbors and the constant presence of TV-watching parents in the chawl, made it challenging for them to maintain a consistent study schedule. Priya articulates the pressure to match the pace of their brothers in both studying and working, stating, *"Agar ek glass paani bhi lena hoga na mujhe uthanenge, agar mai padh bhi nahi hun, to par mera bhai phone bhi dekh raha hoga na use nahi uthayenge."* Priya adds, *"Mere bhai kabhi mere liye ya mummy ke liye khana nahi banayga, apne aur papa ke liye bana lega."*

The strict school timings and punctuality clash with their home culture, resulting in a mismatch between home and school environments. This mismatch makes it difficult for them to adhere to school schedules, fostering a lack of interest and focus on education. Priya expresses, *"Hum sawal puch nahi pate, kuki hume daar lagta hai, mam bol deti hai, ki school the nahi to raise samajh ayega? Maine to kabhi zindagi me sawaal nahi pucha, jaise chalta hai chalne deti hun chahe samajh aaye ya na aaye."*

Even the school and teachers never attempted to understand how their students' lives were impacted by COVID and how they could offer better support. During classes, insensitive remarks from teachers, such as Reema's teacher saying, *"Tum log ek 10 rupees ka colour ka daba nahi la sakte ho,"* while she was asking to borrow her friend's color box, or Priya noting her teacher saying, *"Movie dekhni ho ya phone. Karna ho na tum do minute me apna smartphone chala loge, kaam ke liye nahi chaloge,"* contribute to an impersonal and formal relationship between students and teachers. The disconnect between the school's expectations and the unpredictable lives of these young girls further adds to their struggles.

5. EDUCATION VS EMPLOYMENT

The intertwined narratives of Kajal, Reema, and Priya encapsulate a tapestry of complexities surrounding the nexus between education and employment within the socio-economic structures that enfold their lives. Kajal's tragic entanglement in an exploitative marriage lays bare the insidious repercussions of early marriage unions, financial subjugation, and the absence of higher education. Chachaji's manipulative control not only shackles Kajal's husband's vocational pursuits but also perpetuates a disconcerting cycle of economic vulnerability, ensnaring both sides of families in dire straits. Her poignant comparisons with her employer, Sukhmani, spotlight the gaping disparities in opportunities between education and employment, emblematic of the pervasive societal inequalities etched into their lives.

Reema's narrative, a complex interplay of familial challenges, societal expectations, and financial constraints, reveals the stifling impact of dowry culture on aspirations and choices. The economic barriers not only thwart her educational pursuits but also truncate her artistic ambitions. The entrenched social hierarchies between employer and employee families further compound Reema's struggle for personal and professional growth, underscoring the imperative of dismantling societal expectations to foster individual empowerment. This critical case study intensifies the call for dismantling systemic barriers that perpetuate cycles of inequality for young women in her community.

In Priya's case, the prevailing dowry-centric mindset reverberates through her community, casting shadows over young women's access to education and economic stability. Powerlessness in the workplace, delayed salaries, and unjust comparisons and instability in getting work depict a stark reality that necessitates urgent societal shifts. The lack of awareness about available government scholarships further compounds the educational challenges faced by Priya and her peers. The financial strains resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic downturn have severed their ties with education. The loss of touch with studies, coupled with unfavorable study environments and distractions, further exacerbates the educational barriers confronting Priya. The restrictive nature of work, coupled with delayed salaries and an inability to make financial decisions, perpetuates a cycle of powerlessness and instability. The education system itself becomes a source of frustration for Priya and her peers, as the rigid structures and impersonal relationships with teachers fail to accommodate the unique challenges faced by students

from marginalized backgrounds. The mismatch between home culture and school environments, coupled with a lack of understanding from teachers, results in a disengagement from education. The impact of the COVID-induced financial crisis amplifies the barriers faced by women like Priya, shedding light on the far-reaching consequences of external factors on educational and employment opportunities. Her yearning for financial independence and respect is continually overshadowed by cultural norms that prioritise dowry over individual achievements, perpetuating a cycle of inequality and limiting her aspirations. Priya's journey serves as a poignant illustration of the complex interplay of economic, cultural, and educational factors that contribute to the marginalisation of young women striving for a better future. Her story is emblematic of a larger systemic issue that requires attention and reform.

Education, regarded as a fundamental right rather than a mere tool for upward mobility, paradoxically intensifies the marginalization of young women in its current state, evolving into a source of frustration and extended exclusion. Consequently, the solution does not solely lie in offering scholarships, as this approach falls short of addressing the complex task of providing young women with access to quality education. The challenges extend beyond a simple lack of awareness about available funding. Even when these women are aware of scholarship opportunities, a myriad of obstacles hinder their ability to seize these chances. Personal narratives, such as Priya's struggle with missing documentation due to relocation and Reema's challenge in allocating time away from work due to financial constraints, offer glimpses into the intricate barriers these girls face.

6. CONCLUSION

The narratives of women hailing from a position of marginalisation collectively form a complex tapestry interwoven with societal expectations, financial constraints, and a pervasive lack of awareness. In stark contrast to their more privileged counterparts, these young girls are acutely aware that carefree childhoods are a luxury beyond their reach. This intricate interplay creates an entangled web, perpetuating a distressing cycle of vulnerability that underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions, empowerment, and societal metamorphosis. The threads of these stories emphasize the imperative to break free from exploitative cycles, advocating for education and employment avenues that empower rather than entrap, to ensure equal educational opportunities for all girls, allowing them to realize their full potential.

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Author(s) Contribution

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The study did not involve any clinical interventions or experiments requiring formal ethical approval.

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