# Ensuring No One is Left Behind: A Sociological Inquiry into the Intersectional Impediments to Dalit Women Accessing Higher Education in India

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## Abstract

*While the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) envision "leaving no one behind", this study critically examines the realization of the 2030-agenda in terms of the Intersectional impediments to Dalit Women Accessing Higher Education in India. Drawing on lived experiences across multiple regions viz. studies from North, West, East and South India — this research highlights how caste, class and gender discrimination shapes the choice, course and completion of higher education by Dalit women. Despite the functionality of higher education in social mobility, several Dalit women face immanent barriers including overt biases, subtle violence, Financial barriers, early marriage and domestic responsibilities. Although government policies aim to improve access, implementation gaps persist limiting their reach. By locating socio-economic, cultural, institutional and patriarchal barriers encountered by Dalit women, Dasthagir, Archana and Kavitha argue that while aspirations have risen, the struggle for educational equity remains deeply entangled in intersectional impediments challenging India's commitment to SDGs.*

## Keywords

Lived experiences of Dalit women, Access to higher education, Intersectionality, Dalit feminism, Sustainable Development Goals.

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## 1. Background

Higher education plays a critical role in shaping both individual lives and society at large. It is not merely an institution for acquiring academic knowledge but a powerful social mechanism that influences social mobility, cultural norms, and economic development. It serves as a means of socialization, preparing individuals to perform specific roles within society while transmitting societal values, norms, and essential skills. A well-educated population is widely regarded as a key factor in fostering social stability by creating a skilled workforce that supports economic and social systems (Khanal *et al.*, 2023).

In light of the significance of higher education for social development, the Sustainable Development Goals (2016-2030) present a comprehensive and ambitious vision for education. SDG 4: Quality Education extends beyond primary education, emphasizing the need for inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education at all levels, including higher education. This goal aims to ensure that all individuals have access to lifelong learning opportunities, thereby increasing access to tertiary education, which is directly linked to achieving other SDGs. Furthermore, higher education is explicitly recognized in the SDG framework for its role in fostering research, innovation, and capacity-building-essential components in addressing global challenges such as climate change, inequality, and public health crises. The SDGs also highlight the importance of international collaboration in higher education, promoting global partnerships to strengthen education systems and facilitate knowledge exchange across borders (Franco *et al.*, 2019).

However, higher education is also a site of social stratification and inequality, as access to it is often determined by socioeconomic status, thereby reinforcing existing social hierarchies. Individuals from economically privileged backgrounds are more likely to attend prestigious institutions, securing high-paying jobs, whereas those from marginalized communities face systemic barriers to higher education, limiting their opportunities for upward mobility.

Consequently, the education system perpetuates structural inequalities by legitimizing and reproducing disparities based on class, caste, gender, and ethnicity. Additionally, higher education shapes individual identities and social interactions. University experiences influence how individuals perceive themselves and engage with society. Academic credentials, such as "college graduate" or "doctoral degree holder," carry significant social capital, shaping one's societal status and recognition. Recognizing these disparities, SDG 4 places a strong emphasis on equity, advocating for increased access to higher education for marginalized and underrepresented groups, including women, persons with disabilities, and individuals from low-income and rural backgrounds (Thampi & Odathakkal, 2023).

Against this backdrop, this article critically examines the SDG agenda's effectiveness in ensuring inclusive development by assessing the extent to which higher education opportunities are accessible to Dalit women in India. Drawing on empirical evidence from three studies conducted in North India (Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and Bihar), one from West India, one from East India, and two from South India (Telangana and Tamil Nadu), this study highlights the compounded effects of caste-based discrimination, patriarchal constraints, and economic marginalization on Dalit women's educational experiences.

## 2. Higher Education and Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals and their associated targets constitute the global development framework introduced by the United Nations as the successor to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Adopted by 195 nations in 2015, the SDGs form the foundation of Agenda 2030, a comprehensive roadmap aimed at achieving sustainable development by 2030. Rooted in a people-centric approach, the SDGs emphasize accountability, transparency, and inclusivity, positioning them as a model for holistic societal progress.

While the MDGs primarily focused on basic education and universal access to primary schooling, the SDGs adopt a broader vision, particularly emphasizing the role of higher education in sustainable development (Franco *et al.*, 2019). The SDG framework

places significant emphasis on equity in higher education, advocating for greater access among marginalized populations, including women, persons with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged groups (Sachs, 2012).

By expanding access to higher education, particularly for historically excluded groups, the SDGs aim to reduce inequality (SDG 10) and enhance social mobility. Higher education serves as a mechanism for breaking socio-economic barriers, fostering workforce participation, governance inclusion, and decision-making agency. However, despite the transformative potential of this global agenda, concerns persist regarding its effectiveness in addressing the needs of structurally marginalized populations, raising critical questions about its equitable impact across diverse social strata (Pandey, 2023).

## 3. Relevance of Higher Education for Gender Development

Higher education plays a transformative role in challenging traditional social structures and empowering women, particularly those from marginalized communities. It provides specialized skills, fosters economic independence, and contributes to societal development. As more women enter higher education, gender stereotypes weaken, promoting greater gender equality across various sectors and enhancing the collective social fabric.

However, structural inequalities-including caste, class, and gender disparities-continue to shape women's access to higher education. Despite legal and social advancements, women from lower castes, rural regions, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds face significant barriers to educational attainment. These inequalities reinforce existing social hierarchies, restricting many women from pursuing higher education and accessing better economic opportunities, thereby perpetuating patriarchal and caste-based discrimination (Deshpande, 2013).

Beyond its economic benefits, higher education reshapes women's identities, enabling them to redefine their roles within the family and society. Educated women are more likely to challenge societal norms, drive social change within their communities, and promote values of equality, self-reliance, and empowerment.

## 4. Significance of Higher education for Dalit women

Feminist sociologist Gail Omvedt has described Indian Dalit women as the "Dalit among Dalits", emphasizing their multifaceted discrimination within Indian society. Historically marginalized, Dalit women experience triple oppression-based on gender, caste, and patriarchal structures, including those within their own communities.

The term "Dalit" refers to those positioned at the lowest strata of the caste hierarchy, historically subjected to social exclusion, systemic oppression, and discrimination. Dalit women, however, face an intensified form of subjugation due to the intersectionality of caste, gender, and class inequalities. Their experiences have been conceptualized as "double oppression" (ADRF, 2013), highlighting their unique vulnerabilities in both caste-based and gendered social structures.

## 5. Theoretical Framework

According to intersectionality theory, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, individuals belonging to multiple marginalized groups experience overlapping and compounded forms of discrimination. Dalit women, as members of both the lowest caste and a patriarchal society, are subjected to caste-based oppression, gender subjugation, and economic marginalization. They face exploitation in various forms, including lower wages, restricted access to education, and limited mobility. In rural India, Dalit women are frequently forced into manual labor, particularly in occupations deemed "impure", such as sanitation work, which perpetuates their socio-economic subjugation.

Due to these intersecting oppressions, Dalit women are socially stigmatized and dehumanized in everyday interactions, reinforcing their systemic exclusion. The caste system, with its rigid hierarchical structure, maintains social order at the cost of institutionalizing inequality for Dalit women. An intersectional analysis highlights how Dalit women experience dual marginalization-both as women and as members of a lower caste-resulting in persistent discrimination, violence, and social injustice (Pan, 2021). Their struggle is not only against patriarchal oppression but also against deep-rooted caste-based discrimination, which continues to shape their social and economic realities. Dalit feminism, as a distinct standpoint, critically

examines the intersections of caste, class, and gender domination (Dasthagir, 2016). It does not merely trace what divides women and what connects them but instead conceptualizes a collective subject position rooted in the lived experiences of Dalit women. Drawing from the anti-caste ideologies of Phule and Ambedkar, Dalit feminism rejects homogenized understandings of patriarchal oppression and challenges mainstream feminist discourse for failing to account for caste-based inequalities (Rege, 2000).

## 6. Educational Status of Dalit Women in India

Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) emphasizes inclusive and equitable education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all. However, despite policy initiatives, deep-rooted disparities persist in India's education system, particularly among marginalized communities. The national literacy rate stands at 73%, yet Dalits have a significantly lower literacy rate of 66.1%. Within Dalit communities, gender disparities are even more pronounced, with Scheduled Caste (SC) girls exhibiting the lowest literacy rate at 24.4%, compared to the national female literacy rate of 42.8%. In particularly marginalized groups, such as the Mushahar community, female literacy is alarmingly low at just 9%.

**Table-1: Gender Literacy Rates (All India, Scheduled Castes)**

| Category | Gender Literacy Rates | | | Gender Gap |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Male | Female | Total | |
| 1. India | 80.9 | 64.6 | 73 | 16.3 |
| 2. Scheduled Castes | 75.2 | 56.5 | 66.1 | 18.7 |
| 3. SCs gap from India literacy rate | 5.7 | 8.1 | 6.9 | - |

**Source:** Census of India 2011

Further illustrating educational deprivation, the mean years of schooling for Dalits is a mere 3.2 years, significantly lower than the national average. A key factor driving the high dropout rates among Dalit children-particularly in primary education-is caste-based discrimination. This social exclusion, compounded by poverty, malnutrition, and inadequate early childhood care, results in disproportionate dropout rates. Data indicate that 22.8% of Dalit children aged 6-17 are out of school, with 50% of Dalit children and 64% of Dalit girls dropping out due to caste-based discrimination.

Discriminatory practices persist in schools, with 37.8% of village schools still forcing Dalit children to sit separately, reinforcing social segregation. The dropout rate for Dalit children (ages 5-15) remains at 68.48%, a figure that has shown little improvement over the past decade. Despite government interventions, such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), exclusionary practices continue to marginalize Dalit students. These include teacher bias, segregated seating arrangements, neglect in classroom interactions, and derogatory remarks regarding their intellectual abilities, which are often attributed to caste-based prejudices. Additionally, peer exclusion and systemic neglect-such as the lack of caste-sensitization training for educators and the non-implementation of government schemes intended to support Dalit children-further perpetuate these inequalities.

The educational challenges faced by Dalit children are not merely institutional failures but also reflections of structural caste-based inequities that persist in Indian society. These barriers not only hinder Dalit children's access to quality education but also entrench the cycle of caste-based discrimination and social exclusion. Addressing these issues requires more than policy interventions-it necessitates comprehensive and inclusive educational reforms that actively dismantle both caste-based and gender-based disparities, ensuring meaningful educational access for historically marginalized communities.

## 7. Why Higher Education for Dalit Women?

The enrollment of Dalit women in higher education carries far-reaching implications, not only for their personal empowerment but also for broader societal transformation. Higher education serves as a critical mechanism for social mobility, offering Dalit women an opportunity to break the cycle of poverty and marginalization. By acquiring formal education and specialized skills, Dalit women gain access to higher-paying jobs, economic independence, and enhanced participation in the formal workforce, thereby challenging entrenched caste and gender hierarchies.

Moreover, higher education functions as a site of resistance against traditional caste and gender norms. Drawing from Bourdieu's (1998) theory of cultural reproduction, education plays a fundamental role in the transmission and contestation of social norms and values. For Dalit women, the pursuit of higher education

disrupts hegemonic structures, allowing them to challenge caste-based discrimination and patriarchal constraints. Educated Dalit women are more likely to become active agents of change, advocating for gender equality, social justice, and the upliftment of marginalized communities.

Beyond individual empowerment, higher education facilitates greater participation of Dalit women in the public sphere. It enables them to engage in political activism, policy advocacy, and leadership roles, contributing to the formulation of policies that address the systemic exclusion of Dalit communities. In this sense, the education of Dalit women serves as a powerful form of resistance against both caste- and gender-based oppression, fostering a more inclusive and equitable society..

## 8. Lived Experiences of Dalit Women accessing Higher Education in India

The enrolment of Dalit women in higher education in India is a complex issue shaped by multiple social, cultural, and economic factors. Their struggle for access to education, particularly higher education, reflects the intersection of caste-based oppression and patriarchal gender norms. The enrolment of Dalit women in higher education must be understood within the broader framework of social stratification, inequality, and the dynamics of power, privilege, and resistance. A qualitative and descriptive analysis of the challenges faced by Dalit women in Uttar Pradesh in pursuing higher education reveals several socio-economic, cultural, and systemic obstacles that hinder their educational advancement. One significant finding is the critical role of financial resources-women from financially stable families are more likely to pursue higher education. Furthermore, strong family support plays a crucial role in encouraging Dalit women to continue their studies, whereas marriage often emerges as a major barrier to further education after secondary school. While government reservation policies have been instrumental in facilitating access to higher education for Dalit women, a lack of awareness about these policies among many families contributes to the persistent educational gap. Safety and security remain critical concerns, particularly in rural areas, where the proximity of educational institutions and access to transportation significantly influence their ability to attend college. Awareness of government schemes and technological advancements, such as

internet access, has also played a positive role in supporting their educational journeys.

Examining the role of family in shaping Dalit women's educational decisions, many respondents asserted that family approval was crucial in their pursuit of higher education. Some noted that concerns about safety and the perceived value of higher education often led to family reluctance in supporting further academic ambitions. Another notable concern is the increasing privatization of jobs, which, while presenting new opportunities, also perpetuates caste-based discrimination in hiring practices. Social media networks have emerged as a source of support, helping Dalit women feel safer and more empowered. However, the fear of digital judgment and online harassment continues to discourage some from fully engaging with higher education and employment. These findings highlight the multifaceted barriers faced by Dalit women, including socio-economic constraints, family dynamics, systemic discrimination, and societal perceptions, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to support their educational and professional aspirations (Rani, 2023).

Further exploration of the socio-economic and cultural conditions of households engaged in so-called "unclean" occupations reveals the discriminatory practices Dalits face within the education system. A study on Dalit girls' education among scavenging communities in urban Haryana underscores the intersectionality of caste and gender in shaping their educational experiences. The term "unclean" occupations does not refer to hygiene but to religiously prescribed occupations considered impure, such as scavenging, which involves physical contact with bodily defilements. Research focusing on urban areas of Haryana, specifically Panipat and Faridabad, highlights the complex challenges Dalit girls from these households encounter.

Dalit girls face not only caste-based discrimination, such as being labeled with derogatory terms like "Bhangi" or "Chura", but also gender-based marginalization within their communities and schools. Despite increased access to education, they continue to face stigmatization, are often segregated from subjects like computers, and may even be excluded from activities such as mid-day meals. Additionally, they are more likely to endure physical punishment and be assigned degrading tasks like cleaning classrooms. These discriminatory practices persist despite policy efforts aimed at

inclusion, and they reinforce the structural exclusion of Dalit girls from meaningful educational opportunities.

Cultural and familial barriers further limit Dalit girls' education, with early marriage and a lack of prioritization of girls' education emerging as significant obstacles. Families frequently allocate better educational resources to boys, often sending them to private schools with additional tuition support, while girls are more likely to attend under-resourced government schools. This gendered differentiation in educational opportunities contributes to a broader gender gap in education quality. Household responsibilities, including caring for siblings and performing domestic chores, further restrict girls' ability to attend school regularly and succeed academically. The socio-economic barriers in Dalit girls' education cannot be understood in isolation from the intertwined systems of caste and patriarchy. The Dalit feminist standpoint recognizes this intersectionality, urging educational policies and practices to empower Dalit girls to challenge their marginalized position in both the education system and society at large. In response to these inequalities, the Government of India has introduced several initiatives, including the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and the National Scheme for Incentives to Girls for Secondary Education, specifically aimed at improving Dalit girls' enrolment rates. As a result of these initiatives, the enrolment rate of Scheduled Caste (SC) girls has increased significantly, rising from 20.86% in 1961 to 56.50% in 2011 (Census, 2011). Moreover, in recent years, there has been a notable rise in the number of Dalit girls enrolling in the Indian education system, with more girls than boys participating in some areas.

Drawing from primary and secondary sources of data, a comparative study conducted in two blocks of Patna district in Bihar on educational mobility among Dalit women examines the socio-economic dynamics shaping their educational aspirations. The study reveals that Dalit women's future aspirations have undergone a significant transformation. Due to various government educational programs and policies, more Dalit women now prefer sending their children outside their villages for higher education. This shift in mindset is likely to have a lasting impact on the educational participation of Dalit women in Bihar, gradually altering traditional power relationships within Dalit families. A significant proportion of

Dalit women have high aspirations for their children's education, reflecting a notable shift in educational ambitions. This change signals a growing desire for higher and diversified forms of education among Dalit families, driven by evolving socio-economic conditions and the influence of governmental initiatives. The educational status of a family serves as a key indicator of economic conditions within Dalit households. Despite the availability of free education, some families, particularly those with low economic status, prioritize sending their children to work rather than school. However, the aspirations of Dalit women have evolved significantly, with an increasing preference for sending their children outside their villages for higher education. Many Dalit women aspire to educate their children at least up to the undergraduate level, while some aim for postgraduate or technical degrees. There is also a growing inclination towards private schooling, particularly for daughters, reflecting a heightened valuation of quality education.

The job aspirations that Dalit women hold for their children reveal a gendered pattern in career preferences. While professions such as teaching are favored for daughters, more demanding careers, such as engineering or advocacy, are desired for sons. Despite these gendered expectations, many Dalit women demonstrate a strong willingness to invest in their children's education, indicating a shift in values towards academic and professional success. The condition of educated women is relatively better in developed villages, whereas in underdeveloped areas, it remains constrained by unemployment, patriarchal norms, and limited socio-economic progress. Female education continues to face significant barriers, particularly due to economic hardship, safety concerns, and male dominance, which are primary reasons for restricting girls from pursuing education outside their villages. These challenges are more pronounced in underdeveloped regions.

Furthermore, the freedom of Dalit women to access education remains limited in comparison to upper-caste women. While some Dalit women believe they have similar educational freedoms, early marriage, economic constraints, and lack of family support continue to create disparities. Despite some progress, Dalit women still face significant barriers to achieving educational equality. Socio-economic marginalization, restricted access to education, concerns regarding female safety, and patriarchal control continue to limit the mobility of Dalit girls, particularly in rural areas. These socio-cultural

barriers are more pronounced in underdeveloped regions than in relatively developed ones (Kumar, 2023).

Exploring the experiences of Dalit women in higher education, the study Navigating Challenges: A Sociological Study of Dalit Women's Experiences in Higher Education in Odisha employed a qualitative research design to examine the challenges faced by Dalit women in higher education institutions. The findings highlight a shared sense of marginalization among Dalit women students, both within the classroom and the broader educational system. A consistent pattern of invisibility and lack of attention from both teachers and peers was observed. Many Dalit women students are reluctant to engage in classroom activities, often attributing their silence to the lack of support and encouragement from educators. Some students reported feeling inadequate and anxious when attempting to participate, reflecting a broader sense of exclusion from academic interactions. Certain Dalit women expressed concerns about being sidelined by teachers who demonstrated preferential treatment toward upper-caste students, leading to diminished confidence and disengagement.

The students' experiences also underscore the intersectionality of caste and gender in shaping their educational journeys. Some Dalit girls reported feeling isolated due to their caste background and language barriers, contributing to self-doubt in academic settings. Many Dalit women students have experienced ridicule for their English proficiency, illustrating the intersection of caste, gender, and academic performance. Derogatory remarks from classmates have been shown to diminish their self-worth, reinforcing subtle and often unspoken forms of discrimination. These manifestations of invisible caste bias continue to shape their educational trajectories. Many Dalit women also described the fear of revealing their caste identity, worried that it might affect their social relationships and academic opportunities. These accounts emphasize the persistent and pervasive nature of caste-based discrimination in educational institutions.

There are two main types of bias, viz. :

⯈ Discrimination based on caste, ethnicity and socio-economic status

⯈ Favouritism based on personal biases or physical appearance

The latter aspect of discrimination manifests in teachers' preferential treatment of students deemed more attractive, further

perpetuating inequality within the classroom. These forms of bias contribute to an unhealthy learning environment, hindering Dalit women's academic engagement and success. Thus, greater recognition, institutional support, and equitable treatment of Dalit women in educational institutions are essential to fostering their full academic potential and participation (Suna, 2024).

A study examining the high dropout rates among Dalit women in collegiate education in Palakurty Mandal, Warangal, Andhra Pradesh-Dalit Women and Dropout Rates in Collegiate Education: A Study of the Warangal District-reveals that despite progress in literacy, dropout rates remain high among Dalit girls, particularly in rural areas. Several socio-cultural, economic, and infrastructural factors contribute to this trend. Caste discrimination, often manifested through spatial segregation, limits Dalit students' social interactions and networks, exacerbating their educational challenges. Child marriage is another significant factor, as many Dalit girls are forced to discontinue their studies at an early stage, with some marrying as early as the 7th or 8th standard. One respondent in the study was forced to drop out while pursuing an undergraduate degree due to being visually impaired and having to travel long distances to college. The intersectionality of caste, gender, and disability further marginalizes Dalit girls, making access to higher education even more challenging and increasing the likelihood of dropping out.

Gender bias within Dalit families compounds the problem, as girls are often expected to handle household and agricultural responsibilities. The absence of industries in the Mandal results in most rural residents working as agricultural laborers, earning meager daily wages. As agriculture is a seasonal occupation, employment is irregular and impermanent, prompting many families to migrate to nearby cities in search of work. This migration disrupts the educational continuity of Dalit children. Furthermore, many Dalit parents, particularly in rural areas, are illiterate and unaware of the importance of higher education, leading to a lack of motivation and guidance for their children.

Economic constraints play a central role in dropout rates. Many Dalit families rely on agricultural labor, earning an annual income of less than ?20,000, making it difficult to support their children's education. Additionally, students face transportation challenges, as there are no government colleges within the Mandal, requiring them

to travel to distant private institutions. These colleges often lack basic facilities such as libraries, laboratories, and adequate toilet facilities, while transport costs remain unaffordable for many. The lack of female teachers also affects Dalit girls' comfort and ability to form supportive relationships with educators. Other academic challenges, such as difficulties in understanding English, mathematics, and physical sciences, further contribute to dropout rates.

The study also highlights students' attitudes toward caste and course selection. Upper-caste female students expressed pride in selecting science courses, associating their choice with their caste background. In contrast, a significant proportion of Dalit students opted for liberal arts courses, reflecting disparities in academic confidence and access to resources. The findings underscore the need for improved access to quality education and institutional infrastructure, including hostels, healthcare, and a secure college environment. The absence of awareness and parental guidance, coupled with inadequate state support, often leads Dalit students to enroll in expensive and unsuitable courses. The study argues that addressing socio-cultural, economic, and infrastructural deficiencies -such as improving transportation, creating safe learning environ-ments, and raising awareness-can help reduce dropout rates and improve educational outcomes for Dalit girls. Additionally, the study found that female illiteracy rates remain disproportionately high. The discontinuation of Akshara Deepika, a government literacy program that provided evening education in rural areas with the assistance of Vidya volunteers, has had a negative impact on literacy rates (Harinath, 2013).

Exploring the complexities surrounding access to higher education, focusing on the role of social factors such as caste, socio-economic background, schooling, parental involvement and social networks, the case study on the "Access of Dalit Women to higher education in Tamil Nadu", highlights the barriers and facilitators that shape opportunities for educational attainment. The filtering process in higher education, driven by the need for specialized skills, often excludes individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, who face inequalities in both material and non-material resources. These disparities, compounded by social prejudices based on caste, race, and gender intersectionality result in unequal access to higher education.

Although the reservation policy, which allocates a certain percentage of seats to Dalit students, is an attempt to address these inequalities, its effectiveness is limited by the lack of adequate preparatory resources and social support for Dalit students, which hampers their transition into higher education. Large number of Dalilt women` are first-generation college-goers, primarily because their parents have no prior college experience, lead to a range of challenges including lower academic preparation, lack of parental support and limited financial resources.

Thus there exists disparity in the enrolment of Dalit women in higher education in Tamil Nadu, Correspondingly, although there is a significant increase in the number of higher education institutions and enrolment in the state, the proportion of enrolment of Dalit women students continue to remain low manifesting the persistence of structural inequalities within the education system of Tamil Nadu. Further, the disproportionate enrolment of Dalit girls into higher education is found to be more pronounced in rural areas than urban. This reflects the intersection of caste, gender, and geography in shaping educational opportunities. The dominance of private unaided institutions in Tamil Nadu exacerbates these inequalities, as they often cater to those who can afford higher fees, limiting access for Dalit women who not only belong to lower caste but also belong to low class families. Additionally, the gendered character of choice of course with men dominating engineering and women in medicine reflects societal gender stereotypes.

There is a correlation between the age of the respondents and the family's ability to afford expenses, in which as the age of the respondents increases, the parents spending on daughters' education tends to decrease.

Moreover, the limited availability of the Government colleges poses constraint for the disadvantaged students to get enrolled.

There seem to be higher level of parent involvement for the First-generation college students, particularly in undergraduate programs, in contrasts to graduate parents. Additionally, family financial support is more readily available for students in professional courses and post-graduate programs. In this regard, the government colleges are more accessible to students from lower-income backgrounds due to lower fees then the private colleges for Dalit women pursuing higher education in Tamil Nadu.

Awareness of government schemes and programs is another factor influencing access to higher education. students with family members who have attended college are more likely to be aware of and utilize these schemes. Furthermore, gender and family structure influence access, with girls benefiting from better educational support when mothers are more educated. It highlights the importance of sustained parental involvement and social networks in overcoming barriers to higher education, with regard to Dalit women in higher education (Sumithra & Aruna, 2016).

Focusing on Dalit women's personal experiences and their perceptions of social mobility, the study Refashioning Futures: Dalit Women's Education and Empowerment in Maharashtra explores the diversity within Dalit communities, particularly differences between the Mahars and Matangs. Despite the deeply entrenched caste-based segregation in Pune—historically shaped by Brahmanical dominance—Matang women have made significant strides in education and career development.

Although global narratives portray India as having an improved educational system with increased enrollment rates, scholars argue that there remains a significant gap in securing employment for Dalit youth. Unemployment, poverty, and economic distress continue to hinder parents' ability to support their children's education. Some respondents in the study reported that municipal schools in vernacular Marathi medium had extremely poor physical infrastructure. Classrooms were dark, lacked hygiene, and were surrounded by insects and pests. School buildings had leaking roofs, no toilets, mud floors, and an inadequate number of teachers. The bleak and unsanitary school environment caused many students to lose interest in learning, even among those who initially performed well academically. Many students also expressed feelings of being overburdened. Beyond the school environment, a conducive home setting is also essential for nurturing academic interest. The study found a generational gap in educational attainment, with first-generation Dalit students facing greater obstacles than those whose parents had prior schooling experience. The study also notes that decent manners, dignified behavior, and strict discipline were perceived as critical to the success of Dalit students in education and employment. Parents of Dalit children sought to challenge caste-based stereotypes by presenting their children as "well-behaved" and

"cultured", demonstrating that they came from respectable households.

Participation in extracurricular activities, such as sports, was rarely available for first-generation Dalit students. However, second-generation Dalit students who attended elite English-medium schools had greater access to such opportunities. In contrast to findings from Odisha and Warangal, where Dalit students faced limited extracurricular participation, parents in Maharashtra encouraged their children to engage in activities such as music, dance, drawing, and crafts. The study also notes that some Dalit students engaged in Sanskritization to counter caste-based prejudices, while others felt psychologically burdened to prove their competency for certain jobs.

A notable gender disparity in educational access emerged within Dalit families. Many parents sent their daughters to Marathi-medium schools while enrolling their sons in English-medium convent schools, reflecting a continuation of gendered educational hierarchies. Teachers' biases toward upper-caste students further marginalized Dalit women, reinforcing institutionalized inequality. Even when Dalit women performed well academically, they often faced exclusion and a lack of recognition, exemplifying the intersection of caste-based discrimination and gendered oppression. However, Dalit women in higher education actively sought to challenge these barriers, using education as a tool for resilience and social mobility. This scenario underscores the intersection of cultural capital (academic success) and caste-based marginalization, high-lighting the ways in which caste influences social interactions and educational outcomes.

The study also sheds light on changing gender norms within Dalit families. Many fathers actively supported their daughters' education, resisting traditional gender roles that might otherwise limit their daughters' academic pursuits. In some cases, fathers played a crucial role in breaking stereotypes, ensuring that household chores did not interfere with their daughters' studies. The analysis reveals that education among Dalits, particularly Dalit women, has undergone significant transformations over time, with increased aspirations despite historical resource limitations.

However, the study also critiques the contradictions within Dalit women's educational and social experiences. While formal education

offers economic and social mobility, it also reinforces certain gendered expectations and societal norms that restrict women's autonomy. Dalit women who have achieved success in education and employment continue to face caste-based discrimination, and their agency remains constrained by new forms of middle-class Dalit patriarchy. Although this emerging middle class is relatively progressive, it often enforces traditional gender roles, limiting women's independence.

Despite these challenges, Dalit women exhibit resilience, challenging dominant caste norms and carving out new spaces for themselves in education and employment. Their experiences reflect a dual process of resistance and conformity, as they navigate both social transformation and continuity. While individual Dalit women have achieved significant progress, structural barriers continue to impede collective empowerment. The struggle for justice and equal opportunities remains ongoing, with Dalit women playing a pivotal role in reshaping their lives and communities.

The study situates Dalit women's experiences within the broader context of Dalit emancipation, drawing on the contributions of social reformers like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule, who critiqued caste and gender hierarchies while championing Dalit education. Despite these historical efforts, Dalit women continue to face exclusion and marginalization in education, encountering persistent challenges that hinder their progress in higher education (Paik, 2019).

## 9. Intersectional Impediments to Dalit Women in accessing Higher Education

Despite the constitutional guarantees of equality and non-discrimination enshrined in the Indian Constitution (Articles 15 and 17), Dalit women continue to face significant barriers in accessing higher education. These barriers exist across socioeconomic, structural, cultural, institutional, political, and patriarchal dimensions, limiting their academic and professional advancement.

### 9·1 Caste-based Discrimination

Caste remains one of the most persistent forms of discrimination in India, and Dalit women, positioned at the intersection of caste and gender hierarchies, face systemic exclusion in educational settings. Even when admitted to institutions of higher learning, they

frequently experience discrimination from both peers and teachers. This discrimination manifests in both overt and subtle ways-ranging from derogatory remarks, social exclusion, and violence to implicit biases in assessment and lower academic expectations. While affirmative action policies, such as reservations for Scheduled Castes (SC), aim to promote inclusivity, they do not fully mitigate the lived experiences of exclusion that Dalit women face. Discrimination extends beyond educational institutions into broader societal contexts, reinforcing systemic barriers to educational achievement.

## 9·2 Patriarchal Enclave

In addition to caste-based discrimination, Dalit women face deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that restrict their access to education. In many rural communities, higher education for women is still viewed as a challenge to traditional gender roles. Dalit women are often expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities and caregiving over academic aspirations. Families frequently invest more in the education of male children, reinforcing gender disparities. Early marriage and family labor obligations further hinder Dalit women's educational progress. Societal expectations push them into domestic roles at a young age, reducing the likelihood of completing higher education. Safety concerns also play a crucial role-many Dalit women face risks of gender and caste-based violence while commuting to educational institutions, particularly in rural areas where public transportation is inadequate and personal safety remains a significant concern (Dasthagir, 2021).

## 9·3 Economic Barriers

Economic hardship is a key factor limiting Dalit women's participation in higher education. Many Dalit families live below the poverty line, making it difficult to afford tuition, textbooks, accommodation, and other educational expenses. Although government scholarships and financial aid programs exist, they often fail to cover the full cost of education. Moreover, bureaucratic hurdles and delays in disbursing scholarships further complicate access to these resources. Additionally, the need for young Dalit women to contribute to household incomes through labor often takes precedence over their education. Given the financial constraints within Dalit households, families frequently prioritize the education of sons over daughters, further exacerbating the gendered educational divide.

### 9·4 Inaccessible Institutions

Many Dalit women reside in rural and remote areas where higher education institutions are scarce. Even when institutions exist, long travel distances and high transportation costs pose significant challenges. The lack of adequate infrastructure-such as safe and affordable student hostels-further restricts their access to education. The digital divide also exacerbates educational inequality. Limited access to technology, including computers and internet connectivity, disproportionately affects Dalit women, particularly in rural areas. The shift toward digital and online learning in recent years has further marginalized those who lack technological resources.

### 9·5 Policies and Politics

The Indian government has implemented several policies aimed at increasing educational access for Dalit women. The Reservation Policy mandates a certain percentage of seats in educational institutions for Scheduled Castes (SC), including Dalit women, while scholarship programs such as the Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Post-Matric Scholarship provide financial assistance for higher education. Other initiatives, such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child), seek to promote female education, including among Dalit communities (Dasthagir, 2020). While these policies have contributed to increased enrolment, their implementation remains inconsistent. Many eligible Dalit students struggle to access the benefits due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and lack of awareness. Moreover, these policies often benefit a small section of Dalits, primarily those with better socio-economic backgrounds, while the vast majority remain excluded from higher education opportunities.

## 10. Conclusion

The enrolment of Dalit women in higher education in India remains a critical issue, highlighting the intersection of caste and gender discrimination. While government policies and initiatives have contributed to increased enrolment, Dalit women continue to face significant barriers, including caste-based exclusion, patriarchal norms, economic constraints, and limited access to educational institutions. Higher education serves as both a means of empowerment and a tool for challenging entrenched social structures that perpetuate inequality. Thus, ensuring greater access to higher education for Dalit women is not only a matter of social

justice but also a necessary step toward fostering a more equitable and inclusive society.

Against this backdrop, this study has examined the significance of higher education in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for Dalit women while also elucidating the intersectional impediments they face in pursuing education. Drawing on lived experiences from seven Indian states-Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Telangana, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Haryana-this study provides empirical insights into the systemic barriers that continue to marginalize Dalit women within educational spaces.

The findings reveal that the educational experiences of Dalit women are shaped by the profound intersectionality of caste, gender, socio-economic status, and systemic discrimination. Studies conducted across various regions of India illustrate how these barriers are reinforced by deeply ingrained patriarchal structures, which hinder their educational aspirations. A recurring theme across these studies is the persistent marginalization of Dalit women within academic spaces, where many students report a sense of invisibility and exclusion. For instance, in Odisha, Dalit women noted the subtle yet pervasive caste biases that shape their interactions with educators and classmates. These biases, often unspoken, result in a lack of encouragement and support, discouraging their participation in academic activities. The fear of caste-based discrimination remains a significant concern, leading many Dalit women to conceal their caste identity to avoid prejudice.

The socio-economic constraints influencing Dalit women's access to higher education are also crucial. In Uttar Pradesh, financial stability emerges as a major determinant of whether Dalit women can continue education beyond secondary school. Family support is equally critical, yet many families remain reluctant to send their daughters to college, citing safety concerns or prioritizing marriage over education. In rural areas, the lack of accessible colleges and inadequate transportation further restricts opportunities for Dalit women. Similarly, in Andhra Pradesh, high dropout rates among Dalit girls in collegiate education are attributed to economic hardships, child marriage, and household responsibilities. These structural barriers limit their ability to pursue and complete higher education.

In Bihar, a shift in aspirations is evident, as Dalit women increasingly seek higher education for their children, recognizing its

transformative role in breaking cycles of caste-based oppression. However, this progress remains hindered by economic hardships, limited familial guidance, and entrenched gender expectations. Despite these barriers, there is a growing emphasis on educational success, with Dalit women aspiring to professional careers and greater autonomy. In Tamil Nadu, affirmative action policies-particularly the reservation policy for Scheduled Castes (SC)-have facilitated educational access. However, the effectiveness of these policies remains limited due to inadequate preparatory support and lack of awareness. While reservations provide formal opportunities, they do not address disparities in academic preparation and socio-economic constraints that Dalit students face. The filtering process in higher education, which prioritizes specialized skills, continues to marginalize students from disadvantaged backgrounds, further excluding Dalit women from professional and technical fields.

The broader socio-cultural landscape also plays a significant role in shaping the educational experiences of Dalit women. In Maharashtra, historical caste hierarchies continue to affect the educational and professional trajectories of Dalit women. While many have made notable strides in education and employment, they continue to navigate the contradictions of caste and patriarchy. Despite gaining greater access to education, socio-cultural expectations enforce traditional gender roles, limiting their autonomy and career aspirations.

Across these studies, the intersectionality of caste, gender, and socio-economic status remains a defining factor in Dalit women's educational experiences. Although progress has been made in terms of educational access, significant barriers persist, including systemic discrimination, lack of family support, financial constraints, and societal perceptions of gender roles.

Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions that go beyond simply increasing enrolment. There is a need to:

- ‣ Strengthen anti-caste discrimination measures in educational institutions.
- ‣ Improve educational infrastructure, particularly in rural areas.
- ‣ Ensure better implementation of government policies and scholarship programs.
- ‣ Provide social and emotional support systems for Dalit women in academic spaces.

The ongoing struggles for justice and empowerment highlight the resilience of Dalit women, who continue to challenge societal norms and reshape their futures despite formidable obstacles. To achieve true educational equity, efforts must extend beyond policy and focus on structural and cultural transformations that allow Dalit women to fully participate and succeed in higher education.

## 11. Future Agenda and Suggestions

» Target 4.3: By 2030, ensure inclusive and equitable access to affordable, high-quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university-level education, for all individuals, irrespective of gender (UNESCO, 2023).

» Achieving this target requires dismantling persistent barriers related to gender, socio-economic status, and geographic location. Educational systems often reflect and reinforce societal inequalities, resulting in the under-representation of women in higher education and vocational training, particularly in male-dominated fields. Addressing these disparities demands strategic investments in infrastructure, scholarship programs, and policies that promote inclusive and supportive learning environments.

» Ensuring equitable access is not limited to expanding opportunities but also enhancing the quality of education. In the context of global trends, such as the rise of the digital economy and the urgency of sustainable development, tackling educational inequalities is essential for fostering a more inclusive and equitable society. Although the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize higher education as a cornerstone for sustainable development, access for Dalit women remains a critical factor for successfully achieving these objectives in India.

» To advance the 2030 agenda for Dalit women, the following recommendations are proposed:

• **Proactive Policy Implementation:** Government authorities must implement policies to reduce dropout rates, particularly in marginalized and rural areas, through targeted interventions and inclusive educational frameworks.

• **Infrastructure Development:** As recommended by the National Education Policy (2020), each administrative block

should have at least one government-run Junior and Degree College. Additionally, establishing a minimum of two residential colleges for girls at the intermediate level and one at the degree level per block is essential to provide safe, accessible, and conducive learning environments.

- **Educational Motivation and Support:** Educators should actively encourage students to pursue higher education by offering guidance, mentorship, and resources to overcome academic challenges and access learning opportunities.

- **Stakeholder Collaboration:** Achieving higher enrollment and retention rates requires coordinated efforts from all stakeholders, including students, parents, educators, policymakers, and elected representatives. A collective, community-driven approach is essential for addressing disparities, improving retention, and fostering socio-economic advancement.

This approach highlights the need for an integrated, community-oriented educational model that supports learners academically, socially, and culturally, ensuring sustainable progress toward achieving the SDGs.

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