



Attributes and Implications of Gender Discriminations in Women's Education in a Rural Area of Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu: the Findings of Focus Group Discussions

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Introduction

India is a fast-growing economy and the scientific and technical advancements in the country have tremendously improved. But when we look at the state of women in our country, we are very backward and women are subjected to severe gender discriminations. This is evident from our falling sex ratio, gender gap in education, employment, health status and the high rates of violence against women. There are many reasons for this unfortunate status of women in our country. Our social norms, cultural beliefs and the patriarchal mindset have made women vulnerable and deprived of freedom and wellbeing.^{1,2}

When it comes to education, the gender gap in literacy rate is 16.68% according to 2011 census. Over 50% of the girl children are still outside formal education, wherein the country has put up a right to education act to ensure basic education to all within the age group of 6 to 14. In Tamil Nadu the literacy rate among males is 86.81% and among females 73.86%. Women from rural areas face more discrimination and hurdles to education; the female literacy rate is only 64.5% in rural area compared to 82.3 % in urban areas.³

Gender norms are the major barriers to influencing girl's access to schooling and education is the tool that can help break the pattern of gender discrimination and bring lasting change for women in developing countries. Educated women are essential to ending gender bias, starting by reducing the poverty that makes discrimination even worse in the developing world.^{4,5} Hence, it becomes imperative to understand

the gender discrimination in educational opportunities, especially in rural areas.

The objectives of the study were: a) to find the women's perception regarding gender discrimination from educational opportunities; b) to understand why women face discrimination in education; c) to find the impact of such discrimination on women's life; d) to elicit recommendations for the change.

Methods

Two focus group discussions were conducted, comprising of 10 participants each. Majority of women belonged to 20-30 years of age. Both the discussions were conducted among rural women. The study participants were selected by convenience sampling with criteria of 20 years and above and have completed education. One of the discussions was conducted among participants who were all members of the vocational training center at Vedapatti, rural Coimbatore. Another discussion was conducted among rural women who belonged to Sundapalayam village, comprising of mainly home makers. The participants were invited by our community health worker. Each discussion lasted for 100 to 120 minutes. To start with the discussion, we designed some orientation questions that managed to introduce them to the topic of interest. Then, we went into issues linked to gender discrimination in education that were particular to the experience of the group. The focus group discussion was led by a moderator and an observer for taking notes and observation. All FGDs were tape recorded with the participant's permission and transcribed within next two days.

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The FGD guide was prepared to explore on gender discrimination in educational opportunities the main discussion areas were:

- Are women experiencing discrimination in educational opportunities?
- What are the various factors that influence gender discrimination in educational opportunities?
- Why does such discrimination occur in our society?
- What are the consequences of gender discrimination in educational opportunities?
- What do women recommend for changes in the scenario?

Definition of Gender Discrimination

WHO defines gender discrimination as “Any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of socially constructed gender roles and norms that prevents a person from enjoying full human rights”.⁶

Results

The findings are based on participants’ perceptions and experiences about:

- i. Gender discrimination in educational opportunities
- ii. Why women face discrimination in education?
- iii. From whom women face such discrimination?
- iv. Utilization of their educational qualifications by women?
- v. Environment for women’s education
- vi. Impact of such discrimination on women’s life
- vii. Recommendations for change

Gender Discrimination in Educational Opportunities

Majority of the women felt that women face a lot of discrimination when it comes to education though a few accept that the situation as improved compared to early times but yet to meet their needs.

“My own brother completed degree while I was able to do only till my 8th grade”.

“I wanted to become a teacher but my father said that’s not what women in our family do”.

Why Women Face Discrimination in Education

Poverty: Many participants said that low income and

the financial status of the family decided the women’s education. If the family had financial issues they would always encourage the male child to continue with education compromising the education of the female child.

Women have to do household work: Women strongly said that society and family always portrays female as person who is responsible for household work and it’s the main duty in a woman’s life, she cannot compromise that whatsoever. In the rural areas even in childhood, girl child has to do household work but the male child is always spared.

“When me and my brother have dinner, he gets away with it but I will have to wash the dishes”.

Again stereotyping of women and the mindset of the society that women are meant for cooking and household jobs have laid the foundation for discrimination especially in educational opportunities.

“You are anyway going to be at home and cook, why you need education”?

Women are property of another person-“An investment of no return”: Participants said that there is this strong cultural perception that women are always considered as a person who belongs to another family precisely to the family of the person, to whom she gets married. So when it comes to education, people say that even if the girl child is educated and employed she has to spend the money for the husband’s family. Also since marriage of a daughter involves lot of money being spend society prefers to spend the money on her marriage rather than on her education.

Difficult to find a match for marriage: Another important threat that has been posed on young girls and their family in the rural area is that if they are more educated, it is more difficult to find a match for her marriage. Some also said early marriages are also a reason for women not getting an opportunity to continue with their education.

Educated women are not submissive: They also said that the general misconception or rather a fear in the society that women will no longer be tolerant or submissive when she is educated which also plays a major role for women facing discrimination in education.

“My father said, if you read more you will not listen to my words”.

From Whom Women Face Such Discrimination

Women said discrimination starts within the family and majority of them are men, their father, brother and their husband. Some said that women are also to a certain extent a reason for such discrimination, even the mother and the mother in law does not allow women to go forward with their education.

Do Women Utilize Their Educational Qualifications? If No, Why?

Women very strongly said that they are never allowed to utilize their education or go to a job that matches their qualification.

Men feel inferior and insecure if the woman of the house goes for a job. Most young women who have small kids are not allowed to work since they have the responsibility of taking care of the kid.

Society is not very welcoming for women who go to work, especially in the rural areas they gossip a lot about women's attire and character, which prevents them from going to work outside.

"I have completed MBA but my husband does not allow me to work, I have worked hard for this degree but there is no use of it".

"Who will look after the kids if you go to work, is the first thing my husband asks me if I say I want to work".

Environment for Women's Education

Women felt that the educational environment like schools and colleges are becoming more and more unsafe for female children. The modern technologies like mobile phones and media have posed a lot of threat to women in the form of harassments and abuses.

"Your girl was seen talking to another caste guy outside school".

Discrimination in the name of family honor is widely practiced and blindly accepted within the society. A simple act of a girl talking to a boy from a different background is considered "a disgrace to family honor" brought upon by the girl. To save the family from this dishonor, once again the girl is denied her education.

Impact of Gender Discrimination in Women's Life

Women in both groups were very emotional to talk about the consequences of gender discrimination.

Women felt that they were very dependent on the men for their daily life. They do not have the confidence to go alone to any place and talk to any new person.

"Even for 10 rupees I have to ask my husband".

They have a very low self-esteem, they feel shy to come out and talk to educated people. Because of the low level of education they are always humiliated by their family especially by their in laws. They feel that their own kids do not respect them.

When it comes to educating their children and child rearing, they felt it is very difficult for them to guide their children in doing their school activities.

"My own kids say that I don't know anything".

Low education level also makes women feel that they can be easily cheated. Also another aspect which women came out is that they feel there are very uncomfortable in using modern technologies like mobile phones and internet and it makes them feel very inferior.

Women in the group expressed that they are more confined to home and have very less exposure to the outside world. When there is a need to travel, they had to always depend on someone to accompany them.

Participating group informed that women lack autonomy at home. Decisions regarding simple things in their day to day life or domestic decisions concerning their family are not in their control. They told us that, all aspects of their life are completely driven by another person, at any given point of time.

Women also explained how they fall a victim to the societal expectations that women should always be submissive to their husbands and subordinate to all elders.

Recommendations for Change

The first and unanimous response was "Men will never change", which clearly indicated their frustration on the patriarchal setup. They strongly suggested that the mindset of society, as a whole, and men in particular should change. The government and other support agencies should work together in addressing gender discrimination towards girls. Education system should incorporate lessons and values, within the formal learning set up, where boys are taught to respect women through understanding

women’s dignity. Also, ways should be found in establishing that household duties and child rearing are common responsibilities.

Education should be made free and compulsory for girls up to the level of graduation, supported by a constitutional guarantee.

They also suggested education and counseling of the members at the community level on gender equality and positive role of women within the society should be designed and executed more often within the rural set up.

Discussion

Analysis of the findings from the FGD shows that rural

women still face gender discrimination in education. Their views and perception clearly states that the society has the mindset that women are meant for cooking and taking care of the household and their education is never a priority.

It also revealed that the patriarchal system has made women victims of men’s ego and insecurity. The study also shows that these attributes of the society has affected largely the personality and the lifestyle of women.

Following three main themes were identified from the study: Socio-cultural norms, stereotyping of women and environmental attributes of gender discrimination.

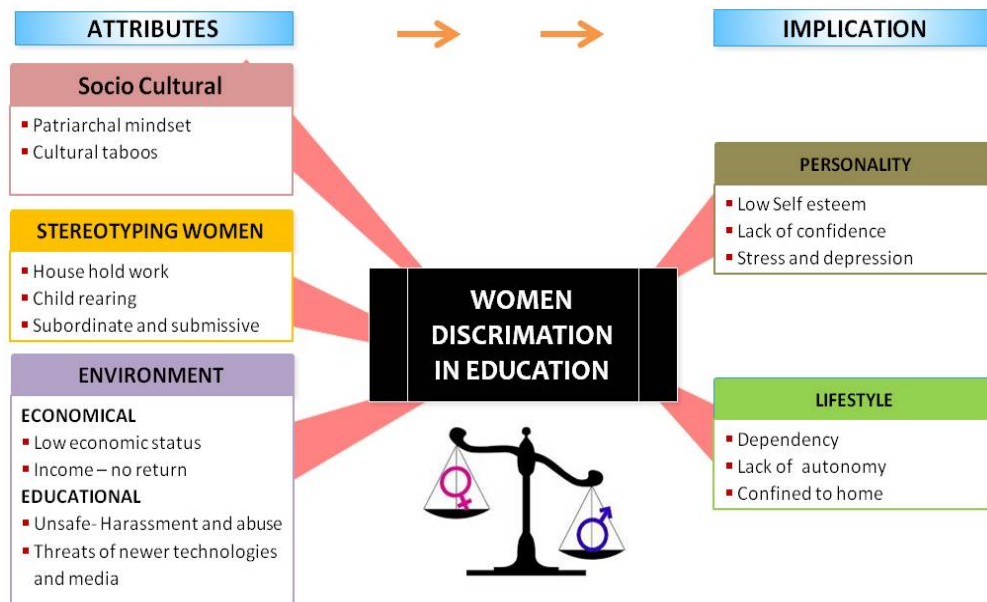


Figure 1. Various Attributes and Implications of Gender Discriminations that Emerged from the Study

Participants in our study stressed that the first stumbling block for their education is the financial condition of the family. Participants also shared that a girl child will be denied her education, if her sibling is a boy. Similar observations were made in a study conducted by Sharma, in which she claims that the prime limiting factor for girl’s education is economy of the family.⁷ A study in rural Madhya Pradesh by the UK government also informed us that the economic situation of the family is major barrier to girl child’s education.⁸

In our study, participants explained that their parents hesitate to spend on their education, as this investment is considered a “No-Return Investment”. A

girl child is expected to serve her in-laws’ home after marriage, and hence her education is of no use to her parents. A study by Arokiasamy explains that parents viewed their expenses towards daughters education, as waste and unattractive investment.⁹ Another study by Madhumita noted that many communities in India firmly believe that the investment of educating girls brings in low returns.

Early marriages were another main reason for women not continuing their education and a similar study report by Gautham, explained that early marriage was a determinant factor in girls not continuing education in India. Adhikari’s study pointed out a staggering 55% of girls drop out of school education because of early marriage.¹¹

In the discussion, participants pointed out that cultural expectations like household work, child rearing and elderly caring are the responsibilities of a girl child, also reduced their chances of education. A study by Narjis et al. also identified that society imposed cultural practices like complete responsibility of household work & caring for children kept women away from education & employment.¹² A study by Jitendra kumar et al expressed that in rural India, girl children are kept at home for household work and rural parents consider educating a boy child is a priority.¹³ Another study by Balatchandirane informs us that, most girl children in rural India are kept at home to care of livestock and thus parents establish a means of livelihood at the cost of her education.¹⁴

Our study group emphasized that their education opportunity is also reduced by the social pressure that "Women should defend family honor". The fear of creating such opportunity by sending women to schools and colleges has been a barrier to their education and also the added fear of harassment and abuse. A study by Narjis et al. also has shown that girls are restricted in mobility in the pretext to safe guard them from sexual harassment, which in turn reduces the possibility of education. A study in Madhya Pradesh also indicates that fear of sexual harassment during long commute to school, discourages girls from continuing education.⁸

An overwhelming majority of participants expressed, that due to lack of education, they felt inferior, low in self-esteem, dependent and isolated. They also expressed that they are confined to home, have no autonomy & are made submissive. Similar findings were also seen in other studies. A study by Lila showed that due to discrimination in education, women carried a very low self-esteem, had negative thoughts about future and were very dependent and depressed.¹¹ Another study by Jitendra et al. showed that the inferiority complex in women is driven lack of education and by environmental manipulation by society. A study by Madhumitha informed that women are kept at home, placing restrictions on their mobility, by their immediate environment to fulfill established social roles.

Conclusion

The gender gap in literacy rate and the magnitude being more pronounced in rural population is mainly because of the strongly existing socio cultural practices that have set the norms for women and dominating patriarchal practices that ensure women follow the norms.

Even now girl's education is more dictated by society and parents and their education level is limited by, household economic conditions, household workload, early marriage and cultural restrictions. Though a lot of positive changes are happening does not match with the needs.

There is a long way down the road to combat the social disease of gender discrimination and furthermore this demands society to undergo transformative changes, beginning with each individual both men and women.

Conflict of Interest: None

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