

Pathways for Young Women: Higher Education and Beyond



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Introduction

Pathways for Young Women: Higher Education and Beyond aims to understand the enablers required by first-generation young women learners from marginalised communities in India to pursue higher education. It seeks to understand the systemic barriers these young women face and how they have carved out collective pathways and individual coping strategies to navigate these challenges. By highlighting these pathways, this report offers valuable insights to organisations and individuals who seek to improve access to higher education, encouraging them to reflect on and strengthen their interventions.

The young women and one gender non-binary participant in this study face multiple layers of marginalisation due to their class, caste, religion, and the geographic regions they come from. The lack of educational institutions in their vicinity, or the distance they would have to travel to reach suitable colleges, often forced them to choose academic courses based on what was accessible rather than what they aspired to pursue. Moreover, study participants across regions encountered cultural attitudes that devalued women's education as well as persistent questioning of the worth of their academic pursuits. Many participants had to negotiate the realities of caring for sick parents or siblings while travelling over 20 km daily to attend college. Even after gaining entry to higher education institutions, including premier ones, many faced discrimination and alienation in these institutions due to their caste, class, and regional identities.

The journey to reaching higher education – any institution of learning post-school – is not easy for many young people, particularly young women from socially marginalized communities. Their schooling experiences are often fraught with various challenges, including social and familial pressure to enter into an early marriage, household responsibilities, sexual harassment, and caste-based discrimination. Government and low-income private schools often lack infrastructure and relatable curricula. Students often need to travel long distances to attend school, which exacerbates these difficulties. Despite everything, these young study participants have resisted being pushed out of the education system, persevered, and forged new pathways for themselves and others to follow.

As women with limited financial, social, and cultural capital, what tools and strategies did they use to access higher education? What factors enabled them to enter higher education and sustain and grow? These questions animate this report. As we explore these issues, one crucial observation is that women face incredibly high chances of being pushed out of the education system at every stage of the journey.

If these women succeed despite these challenges, apart from their own perseverance, it is also because they were supported by several institutions and individuals who provided the necessary scaffolding for

young women from marginalised communities to access higher education. We spoke to 30 young women and one gender non-binary person who had received support from such institutions and individuals to understand their unique challenges and how these were mitigated through enablers. Through interactions with organisations and individuals that support marginalised young women's educational journeys, we sought to understand the range of support that young women need to achieve higher education and beyond. These organisations and mentors shared the women's dreams and aspirations for higher education. They had their own stories to tell – of what it takes to convince families of the importance of women's education, mobilise resources for financial support (for the young women and, sometimes, their families), motivate young women to keep going, determine course options, help fill course registration forms, and remain as sources of motivation and support as they navigate the messy terrain of higher education. Learning from the field, this report foregrounds what it takes for institutions and individuals to ensure young women continue and complete their education. However, not all challenges are resolved for the young women. Continuous scaffolding and different solutions are needed to make this journey possible.

Not all first-generation learners have institutional backing. Some young women independently forge their own path to higher education. To understand what support systems young women require to pursue higher education, we interviewed five young women who were not associated with any organisation. The intent of interviewing these five women was not to compare their educational journeys but to understand enablers more holistically. These women were identified through the research team's network, and conversations with them shed light on the diverse forms of support that can help young women from marginalised communities succeed in higher education and beyond.

1.1. Placing the study in context

The All-India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) defines higher education as “education, which is obtained after completing 12 years of schooling or equivalent and is of the duration of at least nine months (full time), or after completing 10 years of schooling and is of the duration of at least 3 years. The education may be of the nature of General, Vocational, Professional or Technical education.” There are 1168 universities, 45,473 colleges, and 12,002 stand-alone institutions in India today (Ministry of Education, 2021–22). These indicate India's vast, fragmented, and stratified higher education landscape today. Higher education can mean many different types of courses in various modes (regular, evening colleges, open universities), offering several prospects for socio-economic mobility. The study participants studied in three types of higher educational institutions (HEIs). The

largest number studied in regional colleges or universities, followed by those who took up distance education. Rarely did they enter premier institutions of learning.

Enrolment in higher education increased by 7.5% in 2020–21 compared to 2019–20. The gross enrolment ratio (GER) is the ratio of students enrolled in HEIs to the actual population aged 18–23 years. The GER increased for all groups as per AISHE 2020–21. Furthermore, the gender parity index (GPI), the ratio of female GER to male GER, has increased since 2017–18. The GPI for 2020–21 is 1.05. The enrolment number has crossed 4 crore for all and 2 crore for the female population in India. According to AISHE 2021–22, there has also been an increase in the enrolment of students from the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities by 28% and 47%, respectively; the share of female students among the SC and ST students stood at 38% and 63.4%, respectively. While these figures indicate a quantitative increase in women and socially marginalised students accessing higher education, it requires further examination. For instance, a significant number of urban-based privileged-caste women, and students from SC, ST, and Other Backward Class (OBC) communities who have migrated to urban areas and enjoy comparatively better access to higher education, constitute the GER proportion. However, SCs, STs, and OBCs are highly concentrated in rural areas, where women from these communities have the least access to higher education (John, 2012). Therefore, while the statistics show an overall increase in enrolments, they do not necessarily translate to equal opportunities for women from marginalised backgrounds. Furthermore, the number of women entering the paid and formal workforce is still low, and few women attain leadership positions in organisations or politics (Chatterjee, 2018).

Historically, women's education in India has always been intertwined with notions of family and community honour. Early efforts at women's education (primarily for women from privileged castes) in colonial India were linked to making them "companionate wives" and suitably "cultivated mothers". The idealised version of womanhood propagated at that time reinforced caste hierarchies by promoting ideals specific to privileged caste norms. In post-independence India, although these notions underwent some changes, the focus remained on educating women to enable them to handle family responsibilities – to access and use family planning measures and to educate children (Chakravarti, 2012). However, for women from marginalised castes, education was more than this – it played a pivotal role in battles for self-respect (Paik, 2009). Even today, popular imaginations of women's education focus less on finding paid work or personal growth but more on gaining currency in the marriage market. Women's education continues to be spoken about in India as a way to create "good mothers" in popular discourse.

This is starkly reflected in the fact that the increased female educational enrolment rate has been accompanied by a decline in the formal labour force participation rate of women with a secondary school education (Chatterjee et al., 2018). This raises the fundamental question: who has access to higher education, and for what purpose? Does higher education for women only seek to make “companionate wives” and “good mothers”? What does higher education mean for women from marginalised communities? Does it mean developing their skills, competence, and knowledge to enter the job market? Does it act as a ladder for upward social mobility? These are some questions that this research investigates.

Despite India having the largest higher education system in the world, significant disparities exist concerning the accessibility of these HEIs (Zacharias, 2013). Students from socially marginalised backgrounds are under-represented in higher education. When we examine these students’ access to different courses and disciplines, the situation gets further complicated. The intersections of gender, caste, and class are complex in the Indian context, where social and class hierarchies not only determine access to these institutions of learning but also shape university spaces. Consequently, Dalit and Adivasi students face structural violence in premier educational institutions in India (Zacharias, 2013).

Another concern in the contemporary Indian higher education landscape is the terminology used around it. For instance, the ethos of survival of the fittest perpetuates a logic of constant competition that negates student diversity (Zacharias, 2013). This competitiveness does not acknowledge that the starting point of every student is not the same, as we shall see through the narratives of the young participants in this study. Based on students’ schooling and available resources, they begin higher education with significantly different levels of preparedness.

In popular imaginations of higher education, reflected in glossy advertisements of ‘best colleges and universities’, young people in higher education are mostly portrayed as urban, privileged-caste, and privileged-class women and men. Women students are shown to be predominantly urban, exuding confidence. In these imaginations, the women and one gender non-binary person who are the protagonists of this study – young people from rural hinterlands, marginalised castes, or de-notified tribes – are absent. This absence is because education has, within popular understandings, become a consumerist choice, mostly with the best reserved for those with the most resources. In this context, making education equitable requires a reclamation of higher education as a public good. Without such a reclamation, young people disadvantaged along axes of class, caste, and regional locations, amongst others, navigate highly unequal systems, as this study shows. These narratives are crucial to understanding and, consequently, foregrounding marginalised women’s voices about their experiences accessing higher education. Further, it supports those invested in making education equitable by providing them insights to help them evolve new pathways to support young women. Yet, these

narratives also need to push us to demand greater systemic changes to reclaim the public good that is higher education.

1.2. Research questions

1. How do young women from socially marginalised communities navigate, negotiate, and overcome barriers in pursuing higher education?
2. What do young women from vulnerable backgrounds recognise as important enablers in their higher education journeys?
3. What is the role of NGOs (Non-governmental Organisations) and CBOs (Community-based Organisations) in facilitating the higher educational journeys of young women?

1.3. Methodology

For the purpose of the study, we undertook in-depth interviews with 30 young women and 1 gender non-binary person pursuing higher education or employment with institutional backing. We also interviewed 12 mentors who are the co-dreamers for these young study participants and conducted 7 focus group discussions. The focus group discussions included study participants who had participated in the in-depth interviews and new participants who had not undergone these interviews. We collected data between April and November 2023. Our analysis draws upon insights from the in-depth interviews and the focus group discussions. We have anonymised the names of the study participants and mentors to maintain the privacy and confidentiality.

The 30 young women and 1 gender non-binary participant were associated with different organisations in different parts of the country – Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and West Bengal. We reached out to them through their respective organisations. The participants interviewed were diverse in terms of their religion, caste, region, age group, marital status, educational background, profession, and work experience. They were aged between 18 and 40 years. Women from religious minorities, Dalit and tribal groups, children of Devadasi women, and OBC communities formed the majority of our participants. Table 1.1 presents the list of study participants supported by organisations. Table 1.2 lists participants who were not supported by any organisation or individuals. Table 1.3 lists mentors interviewed in this study. These tables are included in the Appendix.

The research team adopted a feminist and participatory approach to research and knowledge production. We do not see knowledge as value-neutral, and we are committed to producing knowledge about the experiences shared with us so that it furthers social justice for the participants of our research and beyond. Meanwhile, we are also acutely aware of our positionality as researchers in terms of class, caste, region, religion, and gender. The team comprises those who occupy different levels of privilege vis-a-vis the research participants. We have sought to be mindful of these differences as we collected, collated, analysed, and wrote this report. We write in solidarity with the marginalised and with a commitment to social justice in higher education.

1.4. About the organisations and communities

The six organisations we identified for the study are engaged in promoting the higher education of marginalised women in different social and regional contexts. Each organisation has a specific vision of social justice and distinct intervention methods to enable marginalised women to enter and continue higher education. For AMIED (Alwar-Mevat Institute of Education and Development) in Alwar, pursuing vocational courses in industrial training institutes (ITIs), obtaining a diploma in engineering or nursing after completing Grade 10, and pursuing any course after Grade 12 constitute higher education. On the other hand, Eklavya in Maharashtra focuses on sending students to premier institutes such as Azim Premji University and Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Muskaan in Bhopal works with students to get them into degree courses of their interest and choice.

The organisations examined in this study are located in various parts of the country and engage with diverse communities through a range of programmes, initiatives, and strategies. However, all the organisations have the common goal of making education more accessible to young women from marginalised social locations. Table 1.4 (in the Appendix) provides additional information about the organisations and our research engagements with them.

As a part of the participatory research method, we convened an online meeting with all the organisations on 27 March 2023. The meeting focused on understanding the different meanings of higher education for organisations based on their context and regions. It ranged from pursuing vocational courses after Grade 10 to completing a PhD. In addition, three online workshops were conducted on 26 November, 29 November, and 4 December 2023 to share our research findings and analyses with the study participants from these organisations. **During these workshops, we sought to receive feedback from the participants on our research findings while also aiming to validate them.**

These workshops helped refine our research insights based on the feedback and inputs received from them.

1.5. Overview of the report

This report presents the educational journeys of young women and one gender non-binary person in three crucial stages: beginning higher education, sustenance, and post-educational journeys and reflections. We discuss the challenges and enablers these young participants encountered in each stage.

We begin the report by discussing how the study participants navigated challenges associated with limited financial resources, care work responsibilities, and arduous commutes, among other things, to finish schooling. Most of the participants in the study attended government or low-income private schools and struggled to get a quality education.

In the chapter on the beginnings of their higher education journeys, we discuss how meetings, workshops, and exposure visits helped young women dream beyond the narrow confines of social roles and aspire to become educated. We track how they eventually gathered the necessary documents, passed the qualifying exams, and began their higher education. The NGOs they were associated with provided them with learning support so that they could compete in entrance exams (for HEI or state or central institutions) alongside students with higher social and cultural capital. We also document the limited choices the young women and one gender non-binary person had concerning what to study and where.

Continuing higher education becomes somewhat easier with assistance in the form of mentorship and emotional support. In premiere institutes, cultural differences and explicit and subtle discrimination make the higher education journey particularly challenging. Therefore, keeping in touch with their co-dreamers by sharing their experiences and struggles kept the study participants going. Support from peers, who accompanied them to schools and colleges, shared notes, and stood up for each other in times of crisis is an important enabler participants to continue their studies. However, the possibility of gaining autonomy and financial independence – for which education serves as a gateway – is their ultimate source of motivation.

One crucial question post-education was how to find a meaningful and remunerative livelihood. The other was how and when to plan for marriage and how it might restrict dreams of autonomy and independence fostered by education.

This report also surfaces the challenges of mentors or co-dreamers in serving as enablers – in particular, the pressures of working within project timelines (since they are supported by institutionalised grants that are disbursed over a period) and challenges in paying individual students' fees, ensuring information is constantly circulated, and motivating women to keep going against all odds.

In the following five chapters, this report highlights the lived experiences of young women one gender non-binary person from marginalised communities to understand the complex social realities they navigate concerning families, communities, and education. We chronicle the journeys of the young women participants in this study and shine a light on their narratives of perseverance and hope against incredible odds.

A Path That Led To Higher Education:

The Schooling Journey

This report documents the narratives of young women and one gender non-binary person in higher education. However, these stories remain incomplete without looking back at their women's schooling journeys. Young women from different socially and economically marginalised communities face the risk of being pushed out of the education system almost every day. They confront multiple challenges in completing their schooling, be it the community's perception that the girl is old enough to get married after she starts menstruating, which restricts them from attending school, or household responsibilities and care work that prevent further education. These two challenges are not the only ones. Many participants also shared challenges they face on their way to school (instances of eve-teasing or sexual harassment) and while at school (lax school administration, rude teachers, sexual harassment). In this chapter, we explore three dimensions that shaped the schooling journeys of the participants – care work and household responsibilities, negotiations with the school administration, and the travails of travel to school.

2.1. Stepping into a school: Navigating community practices and care work responsibilities

The Pardhi community considers a girl to be a grown-up once she starts menstruating. When Palak got her first period, people in her community said she should not be sent to school anymore. However, her father supported her desire for education, and so she continued her schooling. For the participants in the study, different support systems such as parents, siblings, peers, or organisations have helped them continue and finish their schooling. Nevertheless, a large number of girls from various communities are compelled to drop out of school because of the community's beliefs and practices. During a focus group discussion, in Nadvan, Guriya said, "There are so many girls in our communities; however, here you can only see a handful of them being able to reach higher education. This is because most of them get married while they are in school."

When Padma, whom we met through Nishtha in Kolkata, looks back at her educational journey, she recalls the marriage proposal she received when she was in Grade 9. Padma rejected the proposal, which made her parents unhappy. Her parents had three thoughts: How long would she be able to continue

her education? How will they find a groom who matches her educational qualifications if she studies a lot? How will they find a similar proposal where there is no demand for a dowry? The concerns of Padma's parents highlight the societal pressures associated with marriage and domesticity, where education is viewed more as a liability than an asset. When someone from Nishtha heard this, they went to Padma's house to talk to her parents. The parents were quite rude to them in the beginning. Eventually, Nishtha had to threaten the parents that they would inform the police as Padma was underage at that time. Padma admits that Nishtha's interventions upset her parents. They stopped paying for her education. She had to tutor kids or undertake Zari embroidery work to pay for her educational expenses. This is how Padma passed Grade 10. When she entered Grade 11, she joined the Sahas Program at Nishtha, which has since supported her education. Nishtha's intervention in Padma's educational journey illustrates how the personal ambition of young women and positive community pressure is necessary to disrupt deeply embedded systemic barriers to education.

Samreen, a young woman from Kolkata, completed her schooling despite facing multiple challenges since childhood. Her father abandoned her mother and her sisters because he was disappointed in not having a son. Later, Samreen, her mother, and her sisters shifted to her maternal grandmother's house. When Samreen was in Grade 3, her mother left the house and never returned. Samreen's uncle (her mother's brother) took care of them. Later, he was diagnosed with cancer, and his treatment was underway when the study research team spoke to Samreen. Since Samreen's grandmother had to look after her son, the household responsibilities fell on Samreen and her younger sister, as their youngest sibling was still too young to contribute. They were both attending senior secondary school at that time, and they arranged that on alternate days, Samreen would attend school while her sister did the household chores, and on the other days, it would be the other way around. She recalls, "This went on for years, and that is how we finished our schooling."

Currently, Samreen is pursuing a BA and aspires to become a nurse. Samreen and her sister's arrangement reflects how women from marginalised social locations must navigate educational pursuits alongside familial responsibilities. As discussed later in this report, several young women we spoke to share how they have had to carry the weight of domestic tasks and care work at home, and balancing them was crucial to their educational pursuits. Even as they negotiated these barriers to find a way in, at times, the school environment itself acted as a push factor triggering dropouts. We explore this in the next section.

2.2. Staying put in school: Negotiating the school milieu

Palak shared the difficulties she faced when attending a government school in Grade 3. Because the teachers usually kept the toilets locked, students had to go behind the toilet to relieve themselves. One of the male teachers would secretly watch the female students relieve themselves or walk in unexpectedly, violating their privacy. This compromised the dignity of students, who were mainly from Dalit and Adivasi communities. In blatant and subtle ways, the discrimination Dalit and Adivasi communities faced in society were reproduced within educational institutions. These forms of humiliation lead to young girls dropping out of school. Acknowledging these realities is fundamental to realising that young people from marginalised backgrounds being pushed out of school has little to do with merit – the justification offered by authorities and privileged individuals for why dropouts occur (Subramaniam, 2007).

Shikha, one of Palak's friends, recounted that she was good at studies, so the teachers made her tutor other children. If she made a mistake in this process, she was slapped in front of the entire class. Though she was one of the few participants actively engaged in formal school, these spaces were essentially alienating for many. In contrast, participants described how the organisations they became part of offered an environment where they felt accepted and safe to express themselves. It is not that the socially marginalised young participants lacked academic excellence or the skills and passion required for extra-curricular activities. They interacted less in the classroom because there was a lack of encouragement and other necessary support from their teachers.

“We used to segregate garbage and reach school. Our uniforms were not clean and tidy. Our hair wasn't oiled, and the two pleats were not neat”, says Sara, a young Ojha-Gond woman pursuing a BA in Bhopal. The teachers used to mock Sara and her other friends from the community, openly discriminating against students from DNT (De-notified Tribes) communities. Instances such as these illustrate how privileged castes deliberately remain blind to the realities of Dalits and Adivasis and hold them responsible for their issues.

Children from marginalised backgrounds usually attend government or low-income private schools. “In government schools, when a teacher is supposed to teach 30 students, they are teaching 500 students”, says Afsha. These schools have fewer teachers, dilapidated buildings, and lack access to toilets and clean drinking water. The teachers often lack accountability and enthusiasm to teach the students. The students who attend these schools cannot afford quality education in private schools because of the high fees. Nevertheless, a few government school teachers were instrumental in

motivating a few of the young participants to complete their schooling. Sara's teacher spent half an hour after school helping Sara with mathematics as she struggled with the subject.

When one looks at the school curriculum, it appears non-relatable for people from marginalised communities. The dominant class and caste narrative in the textbooks and teaching hardly gives any space for the representation of Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim society and culture. During her interview, Sara asked, "Where are 'we' (her community) in what is being taught in the schools? We speak the Gondi language. We are expected to follow their (dominant caste) language and culture."

The study participants shared how their parents felt happy when their children did well in their exams. But, if they failed, they were considered unsuited for education. In Grade 7, Sahana was admitted to a government hostel in Chitradurga, hoping this would help her focus on her studies, but that was not how it panned out. The hostel was different from how life had been at home. There were uniforms and shoes, less food, and strict rules. Having lost interest in studies, Sahana failed Grade 9 and returned to the village. Her family lost faith in her ability to continue her education. But she did not lose hope; many girls lose self-confidence and interest in education amidst such pressure.

Sahana knew she wanted to continue studying, but the question was how? She spent several days roaming from school to school to get admitted into Grade 10. Everywhere, the registration process was over, and not to forget, Sahana had failed Grade 9. Finally, one school was willing to admit her because they had very few registrations for Grade 10, but this was on the condition that she brought someone along with her to sign her documents. At this point, she went to the village fair, looking for a familiar face. She was not lost – she had found what she wanted – the need to continue her education. She spotted a distant cousin in the crowd at the fair, requested him to accompany her to the school, and made him sign her documents. This was a turning point in Sahana's life. Later, she went on to pursue a PhD in organic farming and practise agriculture.

2.3. Back and forth to school: The travails of travel

For some participants, schools were far, both literally and metaphorically. Aside from social constraints, they had to walk long distances to school because bus fares were unaffordable or there were no other means of transport available. Besides, on the way to school, they encountered instances of eve-teasing that could not be shared with families; the girls were worried about getting blamed for it, but the greater fear was that they might be prevented from attending school. Zara completed her Grade 10 from the school in the village. To continue her education, she attended the school in Bagoda,

approximately 5 km from her home. Zara and one of her elder sisters walked this distance every day. She recalls, “We worked very hard to complete schooling.”

Farida is an 18-year-old Mev Muslim girl from Thana Gohra village in Alwar district. She is pursuing a BA-B.Ed. Similarly, Farida recalls that when walking to school from home, men on bikes would sing songs or abuse the girls on the street. These incidents remained a secret that Farida never shared with her parents, as they may have stopped her from attending school or college. Likewise, Aria also faced issues relating to eve-teasing for a long time. When she was in school, she never reacted because she felt that it would cause more problems for her. During the COVID-19 pandemic, while attending tuition classes, she was followed, commented upon, and pushed by a guy on a bike. When she shared this problem with the organisation she was familiar with, one of the girl groups confronted the person, and the issue was resolved.

The young women participants and one gender non-binary participants in the study fought against their families, communities, and educational institutions to complete their primary and secondary education. It has been a journey characterised by sheer hard work and perseverance. For many of these young participants, select organisations played a crucial role in handholding them from school to college. The mentors sat with the families and the communities to make them understand the importance of education, persuading them to send their children to school. The organisations have relentlessly tried for 15 years and more to further women’s education in different regions of India, which we will explore in the coming chapters.

Arrival in Higher Education

At every stage, our study participants risk being pushed out of the system. Families and communities insist that marriage takes priority over education, educational institutions are too far (literally and metaphorically), peers and teachers at school are condescending, and exams are hard to clear. These are some realities that the young women and the gender non-binary person in our study have been negotiating for years. Yet, they persist and continue with their education.

In this chapter, we explore various personal stories that illustrate how the desire for higher education is often cultivated by external factors, such as organisational interventions, including mentoring and career guidance, rather than being solely intrinsic. The organisations' handholding goes beyond guidance; they offer sustained support throughout the educational journey. To overcome financial barriers, organisations also offer fee support, provide stationery items, and arrange for tuition classes.

Despite this support, young women continually face challenges that force them to confront their families, communities, and social and systemic structures. For instance, they struggle to overcome the lack of proper paperwork so as not to derail their educational aspirations. Requirements for qualifying entrance tests and interviews and entering higher educational institutions significantly differ for students from marginalised communities; they require extra support to cover that extra mile. Choosing the right course also played a key role in determining the educational trajectories of the study participants.

This chapter also explores the strategies various organisations adopted to support their students. The dreams around education are shared dreams – of families, peers, and communities – where the aspiration is to be prepared for life's challenges or to transition to a life without these challenges altogether. We explore these further in this chapter.

3.1. Dreaming Together: Cultivating aspirations around education

Padma (referred to in the last chapter) continues her college education today by tutoring neighbourhood children and doing some stitching work. She also gets some financial help from Nishtha through the Sahas Program. By the time Padma reached Grade 12, she was already earning through tailoring and Zari embroidery work. Her parents suggested she become financially

independent by taking up tailoring and embroidery work full-time and stop her schooling. She disagreed with her parents because she wanted to continue studying. She had learned tailoring but did not want to make it a career, because she wanted to challenge the norm of women being confined to the home. According to her, sewing and stitching are women's work because these can be done at home, alongside looking after household chores and caring for older adults and children. She said, "I chose education because I want to go outside and see the world." She also aspires to earn more money by earning an educational qualification rather than by pursuing tailoring and embroidery. She feels that education and better employment will not only increase her value in the family and community but also enable her to make important decisions, such as choosing whom to vote for in the elections.

Like Padma, the young women in the villages in Alwar understand the rights guaranteed by the Constitution while also being aware of how their rights are denied. They view education as a means to secure a life free from working in the fields and being subjected to criticism by family members. They aspire to wear fashionable clothes and eat the food they choose. These small dreams reflect the big concerns of our society, where there are multiple restrictions on women. Many times, women are confronted by too few choices. They also perceive higher education as a journey resulting in "no fear in the hearts", says a young woman participant from Alwar in the FGD. The 'fear' they believe education would help disperse could be anything – being ill-treated by the family and community or being forced to live a life of their family's choice.

Neha, a young woman from Hospete, said, "Higher education is power." She elaborated that it was the power to know and learn without depending on others. It instilled in her greater confidence and helped her find ways to reduce her family's suffering. While she saw economic mobility as crucial to reducing the suffering of families, 'education as power' meant more – it was the means to fight institutionalised systems of discrimination.

Study participants from the Ojha-Gond community in Bhopal shared how some of them fought with the police to stop them from calling them 'Kargil'; Kargil is used pejoratively to refer to people from some DNT communities. From the time of the British, the term 'Kargil' has been used by the authorities to refer to the alleged criminality of some communities in India. When Sara and her peers demanded that the term Kargil be removed from official documents, the authorities had mocked them, enquiring if they had studied a lot. When Sara answered affirmatively, she was asked to read a doctor's prescription. She says, "When I read it correctly, they realised that some people in our basti are educated and wrote our report properly." For the participants from DNT communities in our study, education has made authorities a little more accessible.

Education has also become a means to explore oneself. For the one gender non-binary participant in the study, education has been key to learning about oneself. Asher was assigned ‘female’ at birth; he is currently exploring his identity and enjoys dressing up or being addressed as a boy. He believes that if he had not come to Muskaan, he would have been married off and may have even given birth to a few children by now. Education is vital to Asher because it has made him aware of his gender identity. Looking back at his life as a girl, he says, “I live freely now; I can wear shorts, I can cut my hair, I can do whatever I want.”

Notably, the study participants drew a connection between domestic violence and education in their narratives. The participants from Nadvan and Maduvan shared that girls are often married off early, even before turning 18. A few young girls in their villages have died due to early pregnancies and domestic violence. Bano and Tara believe that with the help of education, women can more easily leave abusive relationships. According to them, education results in a more civilised family life, where there is no space for any violence, be it child abuse or spousal violence. Chanda, a young woman from Mohanpur village in Kolkata, said, “I have seen domestic violence since childhood. I don’t want to live a life like that my mother has lived.”

The association of superior morality with education often leads to the assumption that the well-educated do not perpetuate abuse while the economically poor and illiterate are uncivilised and less evolved. Domestic violence is a product of patriarchy, which thrives on power. Thus, a hierarchy of any kind, whether it be based on education or social or geographical location, escalates patriarchy. The *National Family Health Survey 5*, conducted between 2019 and 2021, revealed that more than 29% of the women interviewed had experienced domestic violence. Many development practitioners have shared that there is a lack of information on domestic violence among the privileged castes and classes for three reasons – the pressure to protect the family’s honour, the women often lack the resources to fight against it, and the family’s desire to be perceived as respectable or educated. Although education might not eliminate domestic violence, the study participants believed that it serves as an important buffer against it.

3.2. Support systems: Organisational interventions

The participants have varied interpretations of education influenced by their life experiences; however, for all of them, education serves as a pathway to freedom. Organisations have played a major role in constructing this view on education among the participants. In contexts where young women were not supposed to dream for themselves, organisations have worked hard to build their aspirations and

dreams around education. Training, workshops, and exposure visits were crucial to the study participants learning that pathways beyond narrow confines were possible.

As described by a young woman, AMIED's journey began when its founder, Noor Mohammad, visited the families of young women. He worked to help the parents grasp the significance of education, encouraging them to enrol their daughters in school. The mentors visited villages and started teaching the students themselves. Initially, they faced resistance from the community and were accused of indulging in immoral activities. With time, they built a rapport with the parents, although some were still not ready to send their daughters to school, even after multiple conversations. This was because, as noted by a young participant, there is a perception that education "makes girls speak a lot, which is not right." Since one has to venture out of the house for education, restrictions on mobility are reduced, and girls risk getting labelled as having questionable character. It was also found that some participants have internalised restrictions around mobility. One of the young participants from Nadvan shared, "Girls also do not get opportunities (in education, to attend meetings and workshops, etc) because they talk to boys." 'Talking to boys' here suggests starting romantic relationships with men.

When young girls are eager to study, but their parents are unwilling, AMIED supports them in attending school. The girls who initially joined the organisation are now Leader Girls. The Leaders Girls talk to the parents of young girls in their villages and conduct meetings and sessions, stressing the need for education. The Leader Girls also teach in the learning centres established by AMIED in different villages, for which they are paid. The learning centres were established during the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools were closed and many girls lost their access to education. AMIED invited a resource person from outside of the region to train the Leader Girls in teaching. For young women who want to study in Alwar, the organisation offers a place in the city where they can stay and continue their studies. The young women from AMIED also fight to reduce barriers to education; for example, some of them campaigned with local authorities to establish fresh drinking water facilities arranged in government schools.

Like AMIED, the staff from CSEI (Centre for Social Equity and Inclusion) also visit families, talk to them, have meals with them, and build a rapport. Sometimes, the parents were not ready to send their daughters for training or workshops outside the village, and the mentors asked them for their permission. Here, the legacy of anti-caste struggles and the historical importance given to the education of marginalised youth in these movements are significant enabling arguments for mentors to negotiate with the parents of young women. Education is a crucial tool within Dalit socio-political struggles for dignity and egalitarian citizenship (Paik, 2014). This legacy helped in the context of Nadvan and Maduvan (villages in Patna district), when mentors convinced the families of young women to let them

become Community Leadership and Youth (CLAY) fellows by emphasising the need to create a large number of “educated youth from the Mushahar community”. Through the CLAY Fellowship, the young women fellows get financial support from the organisation for fees, stationery materials, etc. It has also created a community of young people who teach children in community-based digital learning centres.

The young women and one gender non-binary participant in the study shared that interactions with women from other geographical contexts and diverse social backgrounds acted as a push factor that encouraged them to pursue education. “Earlier, I didn’t understand the importance of education. When I started attending the meetings, I realised that many girls were studying and becoming engineers, doctors, IAS, IPS, etc. I thought if other girls can do it, why can’t I?” says Zara, a young woman associated with AMIED. Venturing out of one’s basti, town, or village played an essential role in constructing the study participants’ ideas on education. Learning from the challenges of other young people, the participants seem to have garnered the strength to continue their education. However, encouraging the young study participants to venture out of their homes was not easy for the organisations.

Sakhi, an organisation based out of Hospete, had to defend itself from accusations from the community that it was “spoiling young people”. They also had to find mechanisms to provide financial support to the study participants and their families so that they could continue to pursue their dreams of educating themselves. To educate a family of three sisters from a Devadasi family (who were rescued from being child labourers), a mentor from Sakhi shared how the entire family was supported for almost 16 years – with hostel support for one sister, by finding a job for the mother, finding part-time work for the sisters as they continued to study, providing coaching to enter a premier institution of higher learning, and all along, motivating the young participant that a better future was possible.

Financial assistance: Fees and finances

The organisations have adopted different strategies to support the study participants financially. Tara came to the organisation with the intent of learning how to use computers. She did not know then that there was much to learn and explore. After she passed Grade 10, her father was keen on getting her married, as he felt she had studied enough. She wanted to study more but did not know how to convince her family. A fellowship from the organisation she is now associated with paid her Rs. 1000 per month, which helped her manage her expenses while studying. However, arranging larger amounts (Rs. 3000 and upwards) for registrations, exam fees, and applications was difficult. This was when the

‘Education Bank’ came to her aid. Each person (fellows and volunteers of the organisation) deposits Rs. 50 per month in the Education Bank, and anybody in need can take a loan from it and repay the amount later in instalments. Given the widespread poverty predominant in Nadavan and Maduvan, women’s education is not a priority for families, and financial resources are scarce. Tara says, “...the money helped us continue studying. The Education Bank was set up so that no one has to stop studying because of a lack of money.” Rishika reflects on the support she gets from the Education Bank, “I belong to the Dalit community, my family does not have enough money for me. So, if somebody has to fill out an application form or pay their coaching fees, they can borrow money from the Education Bank.”

Yasmin did not have any books while studying in Grades 11 and 12. This was when she was introduced to Sakhi. The Sakhi staff invited Yasmin to the organisation’s library, where she could study and borrow books when required. Financial help, in the form of application and tuition fee support, as well as support toward accessing books, stationery materials, and e-services, are provided by all the organisations that were a part of the study. Some organisations, such as Sakhi, provide employment opportunities to young women and their families when required.

One young participant, Padma, talked about her journey at Azim Premji University. She received a 100% scholarship from the university, but arranging funds for basic things such as soap and shampoo was difficult. Meanwhile, Nishtha, an organisation based in Kolkata, helps meet such necessities of young women. Basic health care and hygiene expenses are required to live a dignified life. Samreen from Nishtha says, “I get money from here (the organisation). I get Rs. 5,000 every month. I get soap and shampoo. They give these things so that one can study properly without anything pulling them behind.” Most institutions’ education costs revolve around tuition fees and books. Some cover transportation costs. However, the personal expenses required for leading a dignified life remain unattended.

3.3. Paper Trails: The quest to gather documents

Despite the multiple layers of marginalisation already causing hindrances for young women in education, the need to provide documents, such as caste and income certificates, voter IDs, passports, or 371 J identification cards, can pose unique challenges. Official papers often require a father’s name, along with negotiating with authorities and bribes – all of which can be challenging for women who may come from single-parent households, vulnerable castes, or impoverished backgrounds.

Organisations played a pivotal role in this process of negotiating with officials, supporting the study participants in their efforts to get the proper paperwork.

While Rashmi was attending educational counselling for an engineering seat, she was asked to leave and denied admission because she did not have a caste certificate. She (an Adivasi Gond woman) could not obtain a caste certificate because her family was originally from another state and had no documented records. With the help of Muskaan, Rashmi filed a petition in Jabalpur court through a lawyer. She finally got her caste certificate and joined one of the best engineering colleges in Bhopal (MANIT-Maulana Azad National Institute of Technology). Rashmi shared how broken she felt during the process, as she ran from pillar to post to arrange for her caste certificate. She says it best as she recounts how she pulled herself together: *“aadmi toot jata hai, phir sambhalna bhi padtha hain* (a human breaks, but somehow then one also pulls together).”

Rashmi eventually got her caste certificate due to the intervention and support she received from an organisation. For others, procuring documents continues to pose challenges. Samreen still does not have an OBC certificate, Voter ID card, or any such document because she does not have any of her father’s documents – he had walked out of their family. Even though her *naani* (maternal grandmother) was her guardian, the authorities would not accept it. Samreen regrets, “If I had the OBC certificate, I would have been able to use the benefits.”

Coming from the Holeya community, Manzil faced a similar challenge when her father (who had separated from her family) refused to sign the form to apply for an income certificate. His refusal cut off her access to scholarships during her master’s degree. She was unable to apply for an income certificate in her mother’s name, and that made her furious at the time; she said, “The Government should issue income certificates to mothers. Why do you need a father when the mother is the one raising the money through her labour?” Even their ration cards were cancelled. Manzil’s mother also demanded that it be made in her name, but it was rejected. She said, “They even removed us from the list. We have suffered a lot because of the mistakes made by my father.” Undeterred by these circumstances, Manzil, who had no organisational support, took a loan and worked part-time as a typist to complete her master’s degree. She secured the first rank in Karnataka in her master’s in Women’s Studies and was awarded Rs. 30,000 prize money. She used this prize money to pay off her loans.

Provisions that enable young people to access education through reservations, scholarships, or prizes are highly valued. Yet, not all of them are accessible. For those from the Hyderabad–Karnataka region, Article 371 J in the Indian Constitution provides for the reservation of seats in all public educational institutions, including colleges and universities. While this is important to address regional inequalities

in Karnataka, keen observers have noted how very few youth from vulnerable communities in the Hyderabad–Karnataka region can access this provision. A mentor from Sakhi, which has been working to create awareness among vulnerable communities about the value of 371 J certificates, notes, “There is no creamy layer provision...it does not bring a dramatic change...now the children of ministers and industrialists are applying, can it bring radical change? Vulnerable communities we work with have not got 371J – people whose bellies are full (well to do) are creating 371J certificates.”

The examples mentioned earlier show how trying the current documentation system is, posing challenges for young people from single-parent families, marginalised communities, or low-income backgrounds. Whether it is a lack of understanding of the value of certain documents, the inordinate importance given to the father’s name, lack of proof of ancestral origin, or the need to pay bribes to obtain or correct documents, study participants face several obstacles in getting the papers necessary to continue their journeys in higher education.

Solidarity and support from organisations are crucial in finding ways to navigate bureaucratic systems and obtain the necessary certificates. Sometimes, even the value of a certificate is learned through organisational interventions.

3.4. Choosing pathways: Selecting courses and disciplines

In this section, we explore how it was difficult for the young women and one gender non-binary participant in the study to choose what to study after passing the Grade 10 examinations. Young participants’ subject choices were influenced by confusion and dilemmas – deciding what to study post-school, given the lack of information regarding different subject choices and the fact that all subjects were not available in the geographies they came from.

The schools in Mevat offer only the Arts in Grades 11 and 12. For the Arts stream, the subjects are fixed – History, Political Science, and Hindi Literature. There are only two private schools, and they cost approximately Rs. 70,000–80,000 for Grades 11 and 12 for the Science stream. Maryam says, “The dream of becoming a doctor can never come true in Mevat.”

In CSEI, students appear to select subjects for Grades 11 and 12 at random. There have been instances where a friend or senior recommended the subject, and the young woman went ahead with it. Bano says, “I am doing Physics Honours and have no idea what to do next.” Bano has also been facing issues while studying the subject. She needs assistance from a coaching institute, which is likely to be situated

in Masaurhi or Patna. Both these places are far away, and she would require significant financial resources to attend them. For Anjum, the technical person filling out her application form chose bachelor's in Geography Honours for her. The research team asked the group of young participants in CSEI during an FGD if they had gotten the opportunity to study a subject of their choice and what they would have chosen. To this, Bano replied, "To answer this question, I need to know the background and career prospects of the different subjects."

In Muskaan, even though the study participants were not confident about their understanding of subject selection, their narratives reflect their ideas – like Rohini said, "...I knew I wanted to study Political Science...I wanted to learn more about politics." While Shikha said, "I wanted to study Psychology because it would help us understand ourselves and others." When the research team asked the participants why they didn't study the sciences, the women unanimously said that they had never understood the concepts correctly.

Sara aspired to become a doctor. Referring to the poor living conditions in her basti, she says, "I thought I would treat the children from my *basti* for free." However, when she opted for Biology, Physics, and Chemistry in Grades 11 and 12, she was denied admission because she had gotten supplementary in two subjects in Grade 10. However, she cleared all her papers when she went for admission to the Science stream. Similarly, in Hospete, Yasmin wanted to pursue the Commerce stream, but she was denied admission because she had scored around 40% marks in her Grade 10 examinations. The hierarchy among the disciplines also becomes a constraint in pursuing a course of one's choice. The Sciences occupy the top position, followed by Commerce, and Arts and Humanities are ranked the lowest. Students who are hardworking and do well in their studies opt for the Sciences as it is considered a means to success – Science is perceived as a job-oriented discipline. In contrast, Social Science students are perceived to be non-serious or casual about their studies. Thus, a higher percentage is required to pursue the Sciences in Grades 11 and 12. As Commerce involves accounts and finance, a certain percentage is required to pursue it. All remaining students who do not score adequately for either category pursue Arts and Humanities.

Twenty-eight out of thirty-six participants in the study had pursued or were currently enrolled in Arts and Humanities and Social Science courses. Karuna Chanana also points out that women continue to cluster in subjects and disciplines traditionally regarded as feminine, such as education, health and welfare, languages, and the arts (Chanana, 2006). During the interview, Ria, a young woman from the Paswan community in Nandwan village, shared that her brother had told her to opt for an arts subject as "it is easy for girls." Many people assume that Arts and Humanities are preferable for women as they involve a lot of rote memorisation. The Arts stream does not require conceptual understanding like the Sciences, so it is easy. These ideas create gendered ideas of subjects and present a new set of challenges

for women from vulnerable socioeconomic backgrounds. Historically, many women in India enrolled in arts degrees. However, a shift in the disciplinary choices of young women in higher education can be seen in recent years. The shift is mainly towards engineering and professional courses. However, professional courses with high fees are inaccessible to young people from socially and economically marginalised backgrounds; thus, the shift has been only for women from privileged caste and class backgrounds. One of the other reasons is that fewer men take up research in the Sciences as it involves long years of education. They could pursue a professional course such as an MBA and earn a large amount of money in half the time. Therefore, women have acquired those spaces. More women appear to be taking up research in the Sciences, which again has biases against women working in practical laboratories (Bandyopadhyay, 2008).

The study participants also selected courses based on what was available in the local educational institution, as they could not compromise their safety. Yasmin, a young Muslim woman from Hospete, shared that she had to continue her undergraduate studies at the only girls' college in her town. The preference for same-sex colleges for young women is because it is assumed to be a safe space with minimal interaction with men, eliminating the possibility of love and relationships outside of religion, caste, and class boundaries. She says, "I am a Muslim woman, and my family wasn't ready to send me outside of Hospete to study."

Yasmin also refers to the purdah system in Islam, which is often used to restrict Muslim women's mobility. She was also criticised by people in her community for not following purdah (i.e., wearing a hijab/burkha) outside of the house. Sometimes, conservative Muslim communities force women to practice purdah. At the same time, some Muslim women assert their right to wear hijabs and burkhas as a symbol of their religious identity but become victims of communal polarisation. Either way, women are regulated and restricted from making life choices. To pursue an MBA in Tumkur was a long battle for Yasmin – she went on a hunger strike at home for three days. Before this, she was offered admission to a master's in Commerce in Koppal, but her parents did not let her go.

Intersections of gender, caste, religion, and socioeconomic background continue to shape the educational journeys of study participants, forcing them to compromise on their aspirations. The social and systemic hierarchy of courses and disciplines adds to the multiple layers of discrimination faced by young women from socially marginalised communities. Financial constraints, familial expectations, and cultural notions compel many young girls and women to abandon their dreams of pursuing an education of their choice.

3.5. Preparing to enter: Entrance exams and interviews

This section delves into the initiatives undertaken by organisations to facilitate women's access to higher education. Organisations provided information to study participants on where and when to access course application forms and register and take entrance exams. They also helped the study participants write and clear the exams.

The young women and one gender non-binary participant in the study attended local colleges, universities, distance education, and premier institutions of learning. Local colleges and universities enable women to continue their education when their families are unwilling to send them outside the village, town, or city. However, local institutes have many drawbacks – classes are not conducted regularly, the quality of teaching may be inadequate, and the focus may be just on passing exams and not the learning process. In contrast, distance-mode education offers a way to complete higher education for young women who have responsibilities towards their families both financially and in terms of care work. Sometimes, not scoring enough marks makes it difficult to secure admission to regular colleges, and distance-mode education offers an opportunity to still pursue higher education. Particularly during the pandemic, and due to the disruptions it caused, distance modes of higher education became important for some participants.

For the women who finally reached premier institutions of learning, it was a significant achievement. However, these institutions sometimes harboured both explicit and subtle forms of discrimination. Language barriers were a major challenge. The English fluency exhibited by other students and teachers often left study participants feeling inadequate at these institutions.

Natasha from Ekalavya shared how, after her association with the organisation, she learned much more about higher educational opportunities. She learned about institutions such as Azim Premji University, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, and other premier institutions of learning. She was not forced to make any particular choice – but information about options and opportunities was made available to her through classes, exposure, and peer learning opportunities. She shared how her social network expanded through these processes and also that she received guidance in making choices. Specifically, she shared how the support from the organisation enabled her to study at TISS.

Mentors from the organisation informed her when application forms were out and connected her with those studying in TISS, who guided her in filling out forms. After applying, Natasha received support in preparing for the entrance exams. After clearing the cutoff for the entrance exam, a new set of mentors who were pursuing the same course (as the one she applied for) were assigned. “They conducted mock interviews, gave us reading materials, person-to-person guidance...and then after

getting selected, the organisation helped us from the admission process until accommodation in the university was organised.”

Other participants recounted similar experiences across different organisations. Many spoke of how it would have been hard for them to access higher education without this handholding. Farida, mentored by AMIED, spoke of the support that enabled her to finish her BA and B Ed. She learnt of the need to get a B Ed. to become a teacher through the organisation. Apart from this, the organisation helped her fill out the application and examination forms whenever required. “They would keep informing me through calls when the application forms were out, or I had to go for counselling”, she said.

Organisations provided the study participants access to information, be it about courses and application forms, different modes of education, and the possibility of open exams to clear Grade 10 or 12. Further, they helped them prepare for exams and interviews. For the few young participants who were not associated with organisations, these forms of support sometimes came from teachers or lecturers.

3.6. Living dreams together: Aspiring for a better future

Ananya is a young woman from a small village called Nakhe in Yavatmal district in Maharashtra. Her mother aspired to become a nurse and gain financial independence, but her family stopped her from pursuing the profession despite securing admission to a nursing college. Even after marriage, her in-laws were unsupportive. Today, her mother leads a self-help group and is determined to ensure Ananya’s education, saying, “I couldn’t study, but my daughter will.” When Ananya was seen with male friends, community members complained to her mother, who chose to ignore it.

When Ananya was admitted to Azim Premji University, Bangalore, her brother was hesitant about Ananya moving to a metropolitan city and its modern environment. She was the only one in the organisation who had gained admission. “No matter what,” her mother said, “*you* will go and study”, and so she did. Many young participants in the study shared how their mothers had supported them in their educational journeys. They considered education a valuable asset, or in Shailaja Paik’s terms, “a magic wand”, which would lead to upward social mobility (Paik, 2009).

Being a single mother, Neeta’s mother always tried to provide the best education for her children. She worked on construction sites and looked after Neeta and her two brothers. It was both physically and emotionally taxing for her as one of her sons was schizophrenic. Neeta’s family had to skip meals

during the rainy seasons when it was difficult to find work. Currently, Neeta is doing her master's at TISS. She got a scholarship for the first year, but in the second year, she had to manage her expenses on her own. Her mother provides her with the money to continue her education whenever possible; otherwise, she has to ask her peers for help.

In times of economic crisis, the parents of our study participants used different strategies to support their children in continuing their education. When it was getting difficult to pay for Zara's education, her mother registered herself under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) – the money was used to pay for her fees and other expenses. Likewise, Najiya's father used the money he got from the government to build a toilet in their house to pay her tuition fees for her bachelor's degree. Ira's father also supported his daughters in continuing their education. He went against community practices to educate his daughters. He was disappointed in her eldest daughter when she left behind her dreams and became utterly dependent, financially and emotionally, on her husband. Despite social and economic limitations, the parents of some young women seem to be dedicated to their education.

Some of our young participants' partners also appear to support their education. The aspiration is to strive for education as it would bring a positive transformation in terms of social and financial mobility. With education, there is a possibility of breaking free from poverty and discrimination and living a prestigious life. Priya's in-laws were not supportive of her education. They thought it would harm the family's pride. Then, Priya returned to her father's house to continue her education. Later, Priya and her husband built a house of their own. Priya is in the last year of her BA and dreams of getting into the Bihar Police. Samreen also aspires to become a nurse, and her husband encourages her to continue her education. She can talk to him as a friend about her concerns and difficulties, and she sees a teacher in him when he explains complex mathematical concepts.

Aisha, a 20-year-old Mev Muslim woman, says, "The biggest support that my friend has provided me is that she took the admission with me for BA. My family believed that if I am going alone for this course, there is no requirement for that." Support from peers in sharing the journey to schools and colleges, sharing notes, and standing up for each other in times of crisis are essential enablers for young women to enter higher educational institutions.

In this chapter, we sought to map the aspirations surrounding education and the different support systems – including families, peers, mentors, and organisations – that assist women from socially marginalised backgrounds in gaining access to higher education. Many are left behind and never got an opportunity to get into the formal learning system, as confirmed by our study participants when talking about other friends and women in their families. However, after entering these institutions of

higher learning, young people encounter a new set of challenges; surviving in these environments presents a battle of a different kind. Young people from socially marginalised backgrounds face financial, social, and emotional hardships that we explore in the next chapter.

Sustenance in Higher Education

In the previous chapter, we explored the barriers to education faced by young women and one gender non-binary person in various contexts and the range of support systems they needed to overcome these challenges. However, after entering institutions of higher learning, they encountered a new set of challenges. While financial constraints and restrictive social norms regarding mobility, transport, and safety persist, participants also struggle with various manifestations of structural inequalities within higher educational institutions.

As young women proceed towards higher education and attain the legal age of marriage, i.e., 18 years, the pressure to marry intensifies. Young women experience this pressure differently based on their social standing. While some adopt different strategies to delay marriage, others explore ways of balancing education and married life. Meanwhile, issues surrounding transport, finances, and access to safe spaces are addressed through assistance from NGOs, educational institutions, and the state, in addition to support from peer and social networks, particularly senior students.

The young participants who joined premier higher educational institutions such as TISS, Azim Premji University (APU), Fergusson's College, and Maulana Azad National Institute of Technology (MANIT) faced significant challenges relating to language barriers, social exclusion, and an unwelcoming elitist academic environment. The narratives presented in this chapter are not generalisations about premier institutions of learning; rather, they are the personal accounts of the study participants, detailing their experiences at the intersections of gender, caste, class, and geographical location. Many young women find peers and teachers who promote social inclusion for all students. Our study participants formed bonds that supported them emotionally, socially, and financially, extending well beyond their time at these institutions.

Formal government mechanisms such as the SC and ST Cell, the Equal Opportunity Cell, and the Women and Gender Development Cell also help students from socially marginalised backgrounds navigate these spaces. Additionally, platforms such as the Ambedkarite Reading Group and the Ambedkarite Student's Association play a key role in supporting young people's educational journeys. Yet, many issues persist in educational spaces that require addressing. In this chapter, we focus on how the young women and one gender non-binary person from our study navigate these challenges and continue their higher education.

4.1. Marriage and Motherhood: Navigating pathways to higher education

The study participants represent a diverse mix, including single individuals, those dating or in a committed relationship, engaged couples, recently married individuals, those married for more than two years, and married participants who are also mothers. In this section, we explore how these women and one gender non-binary person navigate the pressures and expectations of marriage while pursuing higher education. For some, the pressure to marry has intensified as they progress in their education, while others approach marriage with scepticism shaped by personal and societal experiences. In some instances, strategies adopted by organisations to postpone marriage have helped these young women continue their education. For a few young women, marriage offered freedom. We explore all these complexities in this section.

Tara and Ria are young women from the Paswan/Dusaad community in Nadvan village in Patna district, where women are traditionally married off even before they turn 18. The common perception is that since girls have to be married off, investing in their education is unnecessary. Furthermore, according to these communities, if girls are not married off early, they may bring shame to their families by engaging in sexual relations with men or by running away. To address a few of these challenges, CSEI mandates that if fellows get married before they complete their degree or bachelor's, they will forfeit their fellowship – a stipend of Rs. 1000 per month. Tara and Ria succeeded in postponing their marriages. They did this by negotiating with their families at each step – promising to get married after completing Grade 10, Grade 12, or a degree – and by supporting themselves with the CSEI fellowship amount. Given their weak financial situation, the parents did not have to bear the burden of paying for their education. Like Tara and Ria, a few women in Nadvan and Maduvan completed their bachelor's while being CLAY fellows at CSEI.

However, in this section, we also explore how the strategies employed by organisations to discourage early marriages among young women can inadvertently disadvantage those who choose to marry early. Reasons for early marriage may include wanting to be with a partner of their choice, seeking to escape abusive home situations, or wanting to escape an emotionally challenging environment where they are considered a burden.

“I keep saying that I will marry after some time, but the issue keeps coming up. But somehow, fortunately, it hasn't happened yet”, says Ananya. In her village, Ananya continues, “Among the girls, about 50% of them are married. It is a great thing (sarcastically).” Study participants face various types of pressure to get married. These stem from societal expectations based on a person's age, the poor

health of one or both parents, the presence of younger siblings who also need to be married off, the completion of educational milestones such as Grades 10, 12, or a bachelor's degree, or situations where a lower or no dowry is demanded. For Natasha, the pressure to get married began when she returned from her hostel during the COVID-19 pandemic. The family ran into financial difficulties when Natasha's brother lost his job, and they could not generate any income from farming. Getting Natasha married off was their solution to many problems. Furthermore, as a single parent, Natasha's mother felt pressured by her relatives and considered marrying her off the best option. To postpone her marriage, Natasha sought help from one of her teachers. She returned to her hostel and remained there by herself during the pandemic. She said, "I did not have any other option". Today, Natasha is pursuing a master's in Social Work and firmly believes that education can serve as a tool for the social advancement for marginalised groups.

Guriya, a young woman from the Mushahar community in Maduvan (a small village in Patna district, Bihar), shared, "The girls from the OBC category do not get married until they have found a job of their choice, no matter what their age." According to Guriya, women from privileged castes have better access to education and employment, and they make fewer negotiations to continue their higher education compared to young women from Dalit and Adivasi backgrounds. However, a few study participants from privileged castes also shared about the barriers they faced in their educational journeys, which were significantly influenced by their gender and class status. The negotiations undertaken by these participants differ based on their social contexts.

Married participants shared how they juggled their household responsibilities, partner and in-laws' expectations, and education. They also acknowledged the support provided by their husbands during their educational journeys, which ranged from standing up for their partners against the family to supporting their educational aspirations and sharing household responsibilities. For Palak, even finishing Grade 12 was challenging. She had multiple arguments with her in-laws about continuing her education. She feels anxious about the conversations and negotiations that must start anew when she decides to pursue a degree. Palak's husband supports her; however, the burden of negotiating falls on her. In Priya's case, she wanted to get married to the person she loved. The person supported her education, and she felt it was the right choice for her. However, being a CLAY fellow, her stipend and work with CSEI ended because she married before completing her BA. This left her unhappy.

These stories of the study participants reveal the intricate negotiations surrounding marriage and education. They illustrate how the relationship between marriage and education is not linear; it is shaped by young women's lived experiences of domestic violence, economic pressures, and societal expectations. Their lived experiences highlight how caste, community practices, financial conditions, and family expectations intersect with their education and choices around marriage.

Continuing education alongside motherhood: The negotiations that follow

Anjali, Rohini, and Afsha are three young women participants from the Pardhi community, based in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. They are also mothers, and motherhood has caused them a specific set of challenges. They all look at education as an aspirational pursuit. Yet, societal expectations, family responsibilities, and child care are deeply intertwined dimensions that significantly influence the complex negotiations that these young mothers have had to make.

Anjali was pregnant during the interview and planned to write the supplementary exams for Grade 12, which she had failed. The exams were scheduled to take place again in October, when she would be five months along in her pregnancy. She says she can consider further education once the child is 18 months old. Anjali's plan to delay her education reflects how many young women prioritise immediate caregiving over their long-term aspirations.

Similarly, Rohini, a mother of three children, finished Grade 12 in 2023. She passed Grade 10 in 2013, but she could not continue her studies after marriage. The children were born one after another, but she believed that she would resume her education once they had grown up. However, she has been working as a cook in a hostel in Bhopal for a long time. She has plans to apply for a BA, but there are multiple responsibilities to take care of – the house, her children, her job, and her education. Rohini's case illustrates the heavy burden many young mothers carry as they balance their families, education, and careers.

Afsha had to discontinue her bachelor's following her marriage. She hopes to continue her education and work, which requires multiple negotiations with her partner and in-laws. During the interview, her daughter was 1 year old. When asked about her aspirations for her daughter, Afsha said, "...she will do whatever she wants in life – education, job, and everything." Afsha is hopeful for a future in which the next generation will make educational and career choices without the constraints that she faces. We revisit Afsha's optimism in the last chapter's 'Living dreams together' section.

Systemic interventions are required to support the higher education dreams of young mothers, considering their specific needs. For instance, they require affordable and accessible childcare facilities. Therefore, educational institutions and governments must establish policies that recognise the role of young mothers as students and caregivers while addressing the needs that arise from these roles.

4.2. Institutional dynamics: The world of educational institutes

Pierre Bourdieu (1977) defines cultural capital as a collection of symbols such as clothing, posture, mannerisms, material belongings, and skills. In this section, we explore two significant ways discrimination and inequality are perpetuated in higher educational institutions by focusing on the cultural capital of students from marginalised backgrounds. Firstly, we review how a hostile environment is created for first-generation learners from socially marginalised backgrounds, both in the formal and informal domains of educational institutions. The formal domain includes accessing scholarships and interacting with the college administration, while the informal domain includes navigating friendships and relationships as well as cultural celebrations in the premier institutes of learning. Secondly, we examine how norms surrounding the English language have become an added challenge – restricting people with unexplored and undermined knowledge systems from expressing themselves freely.

Coping with demanding educational environments

Eight participants in the study attended premier institutes of learning, such as Fergusson's College (Pune), TISS (Mumbai), APU (Bangalore), and MANIT (Bhopal). Most of them come from Dalit and Adivasi communities in small villages in Karnataka and Maharashtra, and one is a Muslim woman from rural Kolkata. Among these participants, six shared that they had studied in government schools, where the medium of instruction was in regional languages, such as Marathi, Kannada, and Bengali. They unanimously agreed that the university environment perpetuated dominant or privileged caste cultures. This aspect is explored further in the sections that follow.

From what these young women shared, it is evident that the “myth of merit” continues to persist in premier institutions. TISS did not offer Natasha a scholarship. When she enquired about it, they told her that the scholarship was awarded based on merit. She comes from an agricultural community called Kunbi in the Washim district of Maharashtra. Considering the social background of her family, she asked the authorities, “How can you expect merit from us?” Natasha felt that there was no point trying to persuade them. Then, she approached the Light of Life Trust for financial support to complete her

education at TISS, as they had helped fund her bachelor's. The Light of Life Trust agreed and eventually paid most of her fees.

Educational institutions are supposed to make learning spaces accessible to all, particularly young people from socially marginalised backgrounds. In Natasha's case, the denial of scholarship exemplifies how financial exclusion limits access to education. The young women and one gender non-binary participant in the study also shared about the discrimination they had faced during their interactions with university administration and faculty, with one Muslim woman from Bihar attending a regional college highlighting the dismissive and rude responses she had received. Experiences of bias and exclusion further exacerbate the educational inequalities faced by young women.

Students from Dalit and Adivasi communities, as first-generation learners, do not get the same opportunities to benefit from university campus life as students from privileged backgrounds. The study participants shared the "cultural shock" they encountered in university spaces. Whether it was clothing, language, or mannerisms, everything made them "feel inferior", particularly when they perceived these elements to be the culture of the dominant castes and classes. In urban educational institutions, a cosmopolitan way of dressing, mannerisms, and expressing oneself is considered the norm. While young people from dominant social locations find it easy to adopt these norms because of their social conditioning, it can be quite challenging for others.

Outside of classrooms, Dalit and Adivasi students are "not invited to birthday parties, lunches or club outings" by their peers, shared Lily, who is pursuing a master's in Education from APU. Ananya also shared the "strange behaviour of her peers towards her." She reported that her peers did not smile at her or include her in activities. Like Ananya, other young women also shared how university spaces encourage their social exclusion. Eventually, people from similar backgrounds befriend each other. "Mostly people who come from marginalised groups come together", said a young woman participant during a focus group discussion.

Suma, a young woman who attended the Urban Fellows Programme at the Indian Institute of Human Settlements (IIHS) in Bengaluru, believes that social relationships do not affect learning opportunities. However, the inability to express oneself freely and the constant fear of being judged generate significant pressure. In addition, in these situations, students from marginalised communities end up questioning their friendliness and dispositions because of the hostility they are subjected to.

The boundary between the formal and informal domains is not always distinct in educational institutions; during cultural programmes, these two worlds overlap, bringing to the fore questions about whether educational institutions are inclusive spaces for students from marginalised

backgrounds. Anika, a young woman from an Adivasi community in Yavatmal, completed her bachelor's in Sociology from Fergusson's College, Pune. As an Ambedkarite Students' Association member, she and her peers organised a tribal dance performance and a Rath Yatra as part of an event. She recalled during the interview that the event had amused most of the students there as they had never witnessed anything like it before. Anika talks about this with a sense of pride – for being able to present her culture and access this space. Yet, the 'strangeness' the students ascribed to the tribal dance highlights the dominance of privileged caste and class groups in educational institutions, including cultural spaces.

In 2015, IIT Madras banned the Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle (APSC) within the college premises following an anonymous complaint that the students' group was polarising SC and ST students and spreading hate against some political leaders (Rajagopal, 2015). The APSC claimed that the college administration did not give them a fair hearing. This incident reflects how marginalised students' efforts to organise around issues of caste and social justice are often suppressed by institutions. By shutting down spaces where critical conversations around caste and inequality can occur, institutions reinforce dominant caste narratives and silence dissent.

The formal and informal worlds of educational institutions are deeply intertwined, and the dominant castes' culture influences both. For educational spaces to be inclusive, institutions must not only address financial and academic barriers but also the social hierarchies that marginalise students from SC, ST and other minority communities. Creating a space where all students feel accepted, welcomed, and valued is essential in a learning environment.

Juggling language barriers

The use of English language as the primary language of communication acts as a significant barrier for students from marginalised backgrounds. Due to the absence of quality teaching in English in government and low-income private schools, and the lack of mentorship in the English language, many students are not proficient in it. The constant use of English without considering the proficiency levels of others is a common exclusionary practice in premier higher educational institutions. The college staff and faculty interact mostly with people who use "polished" English (use of correct grammar and spelling, which usually come from long years of education in English medium institutions).

Rashmi is a first-generation learner from the Ojha-Gond community in Bhopal. About 40 years ago, her grandparents moved from Chhattisgarh to Madhya Pradesh as their community no longer had

access to land and agriculture. Since then, the family has worked as daily wage labourers, moving from basti to basti in Bhopal. The hostile school and hostel environment, including the rude behaviour of her teachers and peers, made Rashmi's learning journey quite challenging. It was "emotionally disturbing" for her. When Rashmi joined an engineering college, she faced a new set of challenges. She spoke Gondvi but eventually learnt Hindi during her stay in Bhopal. However, everybody spoke English in college. The lectures and study materials were in English. Furthermore, the language was connected to 'class'. Students from elite backgrounds spoke fluent English and connected well with the professors, which was not the case with Rashmi. The ghettoisation and humiliation were too much for her to face every day, and she eventually stopped attending college. Her desire to pursue engineering waned due to the various ways in which college life had adversely impacted her self-worth.

The English language also acts as a class symbol and a mechanism to exclude people from specific backgrounds. Ananya shares her experience in APU, "They would suddenly start talking in English to exclude us". She and her friends had studied in Marathi medium institutions from school to college. Their exposure to English was relatively less. She talks about how students from privileged backgrounds used English to maintain the established "glass ceiling", which limited mingling among students from diverse backgrounds.

Another young woman participant, Rita, from Maduvan village in Patna district, talked about the superiority associated with the English language. She said, "It is like if you don't know English, you don't know anything". For women from socially marginalised backgrounds, the only place they could access education was in government schools where teachers were either absent or were not proficient in teaching. As a result, although students passed successive examinations for different grades, their grasp of concepts remained poor.

4.3. Recurring challenges: From school to higher education

For socially marginalised young women, continuing in higher education is an everyday battle with the family, community, education system, and social constraints. They must negotiate barriers at every stage – from school to college and, in many cases, in the workplace. Here, we look at how the challenges faced by the study participants in their schooling continued till their higher education. We also examine the support systems that acted as enablers, helping study participants mitigate these challenges.

Struggling for safe and accessible transportation

A significant challenge is the lack of a proper (timely and feasible) transport system in many regions. In Bagoda village (Alwar district), a single tempo (auto rickshaw) is the only form of public transport available. The vehicle leaves in the morning from the village and returns from the city in the evening. It has a limited number of seats, and the participants shared how they struggle to get seats and reach their institutes on time. Due to the lack of a proper transport system, many participants attend classes only occasionally or skip them altogether.

When Yasmin was pursuing her MBA in Koppal in Karnataka, she stayed at a hostel 10 km away from her college. She needed to change two buses to reach college. She was living outside of her hometown, Hospete, for the first time, and it was a difficult journey to navigate; the lack of proper transport added to her stress levels and fears of living in a new place.

Farida is pursuing her BA BEd from Kishangarh Bharti College. She has to take an auto both ways to attend her classes. It takes almost three hours each day to travel back and forth. Farida says, “Had I been living near the college or outside the village, I would have put all the time into studying”. For many young participants, high transport costs made the problem worse. The everyday travel cost of attending college is high, which many participants cannot afford or seek help for. Farida also mentioned that her parents were annoyed when she asked them for money every day, and at times, they did not give any money at all.

The second challenge faced by the study participants related to physical safety. Many young women talked about the sexual harassment and stalking they face during their commutes. Sara was on her way to sit for her second-year BA exams. After a long journey, she got off the bus and started walking towards her college when a man began following her. He caught hold of her hand and tried to pull her towards him. He also snatched her phone to prevent her from calling anyone. Sara began to shout loudly. Hearing her, a few people gathered, and the man ran away. Despite all this, Sara pulled herself together and sat for her exam. What exacerbates these situations is that young women are held responsible for such instances of sexual harassment, and their mobilities are restricted when they share these issues with their families. Sara said she could never tell her parents about the incident because they would stop her from going anywhere.

Bano says, “When our families hear that something wrong has happened to someone, they start putting restrictions on us. Many girls are pulled back from education due to this.. Here, “something wrong” refers to many things – sexual harassment, rape, women falling in love with a person from the same or other caste or religion, or running away to escape a life of humiliation or follow her dreams.

To cope with these challenges, young participants state that they require improvements in transport infrastructure, increased safety measures, and community education to change attitudes towards individuals subjected to harassment. Additionally, providing financial assistance to ease the burden of travel costs can make education more accessible to young women.

Struggling for financial support

Afsha says, “What do parents do but send their children for waste-picking? If the entire family does not work, how will they survive?” She captures the harsh reality faced by many families from marginalised communities. For young people from socially and economically marginalised backgrounds, poverty is a persistent barrier to education from school through to their higher education, including bachelor’s and master’s. Families from marginalised backgrounds struggle with inflation and low-paying jobs, and each family member has to contribute to the basic survival of the family. The intersections of caste and class make education even more inaccessible for young boys from marginalised communities.

In some cases, the study participants stated that they could pursue higher education due to the distance education option and the presence of flexible regional institutes; their brothers, however, could not. After reaching 15 or 16 years of age, boys are expected to start working to support the household, which often meant working in agricultural fields, driving, or working in small businesses. The experiences of the study participants illustrate how structural barriers exist for women and men – although in different forms – and these barriers are highly influenced by poverty and patriarchy, both within and outside of communities.

Students from marginalised backgrounds, from the time of enrolment, try to find scholarships and other financial aid to sustain their education. However, young people from marginalised backgrounds also find ways to support each other during financial crises. Furthermore, organisations have established support systems that respond to the needs of students. Ananya shared that one of her seniors at college had persistently emailed the APU administration to increase the scholarship amount from 25–75% to 100%. The senior students explained that the scholarship amount had to be increased as the fees were beyond the means of many students. Eventually, this worked, and APU revised the scholarship norms.

Natasha relocated from Washim district to Yavatmal district in Maharashtra to pursue her bachelor’s in Social Work; it was very difficult to arrange for food and accommodation. Her mother had become the

only breadwinner in the family after her father's death. One of Natasha's two brothers studied in ITI (Industrial Training Institute), and the other was in Grade 10. To continue her education, she sought help from her teachers, who paid her hostel fees; she took a loan from the Light of Life Trust to pay her college fees. Natasha not only has to pay the tuition fee but also supports herself. In this case, the participants shared how they found support systems in their networks of peers, teachers, and organisations.

Similarly, Meena is pursuing a master's in Social Work at TISS. She has multiple expenses and does not get a scholarship due to regulations, such as restrictions on applying for the scholarship if one is pursuing a second master's. Her mother works on construction sites, and her father passed away a long time ago. Her brothers do not provide any support to Meena or her mother. She seeks the help of her friends to meet her needs during fieldwork and occasionally asks one of her teachers to pay her college fees. Meena says, "There is no point in asking money from my mother because I know she can't support me."

The stories of Afsha, Ananya, Natasha, and Meena highlight the complex financial and social barriers young women face in their pursuit of education. Second, it illustrates how young people leverage networks of peers, teachers, and institutions to continue their higher education. Lastly, these examples reflect the hardships and determination of young people from marginalised backgrounds as they strive to overcome structural barriers to education. However, there are many young people for whom even accessing support systems is exceptionally challenging, underlining the need for more equitable access to education; relevant organisations and the government need to work collectively to bridge these gaps.

4.4. Motivations: What keeps them going?

The young women and one gender non-binary participant recognise higher education as an instrument for upward social and professional mobility, intellectual and personal development, and equality for socially marginalised groups. However, in parallel, one cannot ignore how education has become a tool for reinforcing social stratification and perpetuating the hegemony of dominant castes (Chanana, 2000). Despite being aware of and experiencing this reality, the participants in the study continue to pursue higher education because they believe it holds the potential to empower them. There is an aspiration not only to carve an identity for oneself but also to gain upward socioeconomic mobility for their families.

The participants shared how their drive to accomplish their desired goals helped them overcome moments of low self-esteem. For instance, Nadia from AMIED wants to become a teacher so that she can effect change in the cultural and academic spheres. She says, “I want to teach the children about practical life and develop ethical and moral values in them that I have got from AMIED. Especially, I want to make the men understand how they can proceed in their lives without creating issues in society.” Through education, Nadia aims to address the issue of gender bias and instil the value of equality in her students. She also feels that education has increased her confidence, and she has a drive to establish her identity. She says, “It hurts me when people recognise me by my father’s name or, in future, if they recognise me by my husband’s name.”

For some young women, higher education has brought respect and admiration in the eyes of family and community. Anika says, “Nowadays when I speak, they ask me how much I have studied. When I say that I have studied till 10th, people respect what I say, so if I study until 12th, more people will listen to what I say.” The young women and one gender non-binary participant faced multiple marginalisations because of their gender, caste, class, and regional backgrounds. In addition to the family and community, educational institutions often become spaces of discrimination. Finding a space that holds these young students from marginalised communities in high regard is both a desired goal and a motivation to move ahead.

Post-Educational Journey

Young women's journeys from entering an educational institution beyond school to sustaining themselves in these institutions are filled with various challenges. Multiple factors, including community practices, societal and family pressure to get married, transport difficulties, the absence of quality education, and discrimination in higher educational institutions, posed challenges for the study participants at different points in time. However, the young women and one gender non-binary participant succeeded due to self-motivation and support from their families, peers, and associated organisations. This is how they entered a new phase in their post-education journeys.

In this chapter, we present the study participants' aspirations regarding their careers and personal lives while highlighting their constant negotiations with their families around responsibilities and care work and social notions surrounding marriage.

In Chapter 2, we discussed how factors such as gender, caste, and class influenced participants' educational choices. In this chapter, we see similar factors influencing their career choices. Of the 36 study participants, 20 wanted to pursue a career in either teaching, nursing, or social work. Among them, 16 wanted to pursue only teaching. The study participants exhibited an inclination towards the so-called 'safe service sector industry'. The societal understanding of teaching and nursing is that while these jobs involve care work and high ethical standards, they have limited working hours, so women will have time for household responsibilities. This understanding plays a vital role in determining career choices among women in family structures with exacting responsibilities.

Four young women aspired to get government jobs in banking and other sectors. For young people from marginalised communities, securing a government job is one of the few opportunities available for upward social mobility. However, even in the government sector, it is essential to note that people from privileged castes mostly hold the top-most leadership positions, while the so-called 'reserved category' aspirants occupy 'Grade D' posts. Similarly, in the private sector and in multinational companies, hardly anyone from socially marginalised backgrounds hold mid-level or leadership positions. The simple reason is: lack of reservations in the private sector (Babu, 2020).

Furthermore, organisations and mentors also appear to have had a lot of influence on the young participants' career choices. For instance, Sahana shared with us that she was offered a government job as a bus conductor at one point. The security and pride associated with a government job tempted Sahana to take it up. However, her mentor in the organisation disagreed and suggested that she pursue a PhD instead. Eventually, because of her inclination towards education, Sahana continued her studies and became the first girl to pursue a degree in three villages. Today, equipped with a PhD, she practices

organic farming in her village and aspires “to become a role model in the field”. The push towards education by her mentors, in Sahana’s case, played a crucial role in her education and career. However, it is important to address and accommodate the aspirations of young people that go beyond popular career options such as engineering, medicine, and business. For instance, Aarav, the gender non-binary participant in the study, wants to become a traveller; his dream also needs as much recognition as a young person from the same organisation wishing to pursue law.

Muskaan, based out of Bhopal, supports young people’s dreams of becoming lawyers. The socio-political and economic factors that shape the lives of people from DNT in India can be a significant motivating factor for young people to foreground their oppression and rights through their work. Muskaan aims to equip young people to approach their issues from a legal perspective. Most young women from CSEI see themselves pursuing a career in Social Work. One of the things we deduced from their career choices is the strong influence of anti-caste struggles and the perception of education as a tool for social advancement. Though the participants made different career choices, their goals are similar – financial independence, freedom, and respect.

5.1. Beyond the classroom: Future aspirations

Sara did not think her post-education journey would be as tumultuous. During the interview, she narrated her picture of an ideal life. There are dreams of getting a decent job and pay, a supportive partner, a house for herself and her family, and a commitment to support others from her community. Sara’s childhood experiences and her environment highly influence her dreams. She says, “I want to fulfil the dreams that didn’t come true for us in my childhood.” Sara’s aspirations highlight the dual commitment to personal success while supporting and uplifting those around her.

The case of Natasha (the young Adivasi woman studying for a master’s in TISS) illustrates how participants associate a more profound purpose with education. After her father passed away in 2014, her mother started working on somebody’s farm, and her brother began working as an informal labourer. She wanted to pursue a master’s degree after her bachelor’s because she thought it would offer her better job prospects. However, while pursuing a master’s, she realised that “education is not only meant to bring employment, but it builds perspective, increases knowledge, and nurtures good behaviour.” Coming from a socially and economically marginalised background, she said, “Education is the only capital for us”. Like here, many young women and most parents consider education a tool for social and economic advancement and an instrument of liberation from intolerance for historically marginalised communities.

Some participants in the study wish to continue with their education. The ones pursuing Grades 11 and 12 want to pursue a bachelor's degree, the ones pursuing a bachelor's wish to pursue a master's degree, and the ones pursuing a master's want to pursue a PhD. The few participants who have been to premiere institutes in India, such as APU or TISS, expressed their desire to study abroad. These stories of young participants illustrate how they perceive education as a tool for individual improvement and social liberation. However, in the following section, we recognise the skepticism regarding education's ability to fully dismantle existing social inequalities when reflecting on the challenges the study participants encounter in seeking employment.

The barriers to dignified employment

Higher education has witnessed multiple ups and downs in the post-Independence period, such as the Mandal Commission recommendations introducing reservations for OBCs in education and employment, the booming market for professional degrees and student loans, and promises to increase the educational budget in the 11th Five Year Plan. Over the years, the right to education, particularly, the right to primary education, has led to the setting up of schools in even the most remote regions in India, though the quality education is far from uniform. Yet, where does higher education fit into this conversation? Furthermore, what exactly does higher education entail – is it solely a degree, or does it also encompass a blend of qualification and skills that equips an individual for future job opportunities?

In the 1960s and 1970s, students took to the streets because they were unable to access 'desirable jobs' after pursuing degrees, which led to a new terminology – the 'graduated unemployed'. Meanwhile, privatisation of educational institutions made quality education inaccessible to many from socially marginalised backgrounds. When one looks at the narratives of the study participants in higher education, many are demotivated despite their degrees because they have not helped them find decent jobs based on their educational qualifications. In addition, the discontentment over the privatisation of education remains.

Priya comes from the Manjhi community in Maduvan village in Patna. Though she has completed her BA and wants to get join the Bihar Police, she believes that corruption and her caste identity are barriers in the process. She says, "[people would think] how can a person from the Manjhi community be given a big post? Brahmins and Rajputs think they are superior." There is a high concentration of privileged caste Hindus in high-end service sector urban jobs (Zacharias, 2013). Even though reservations are available to people from SC, ST, and OBC communities, they are in low-paying jobs in

the service sector and agriculture. Currently, the number of reserved seats in employment is declining. Furthermore, many vacancies have been put on hold for various reasons, including due to unstable governments, corruption, and government exam paper leaks in different states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan.

The study participants shared how a degree does not guarantee a desirable job. Their motivation to get educated is affected when they struggle to find decent employment after completing their degree. Sometimes, they are also discontent with organisations for not being as supportive in their post-education journeys as they were during their education. One of the young women participants said, “Now, it is different. There is a lack of accessibility, reach, and motivation.”

CSEI was able to provide access to higher education to youth from marginalised communities. Yet, Guriya is frustrated that nothing is happening after that: “The motivation from the organisation has reduced...we are sitting idle at home after completing our bachelor’s.” People in the community also raise questions about this. They believe that CSEI students have not been able to do anything concrete after studying, so what is the use of education? The study participants believe that organisations should also help them navigate their careers. However, organisations have limitations and cannot extend support beyond a certain point. Mentor Nisha from AMIED says, “The girls want to study and aspire to become nurses, police officers, teachers, or technology professionals. To fulfil these dreams, much hard work and resources are required.” The lack of funding, limited staff, and the expanded scope of work are possible reasons for the limited support from some organisations, which we shall explore in the next chapter.

Building a house of one’s own

Referring to the low representation of women in English literature in the early 19th century, Virginia Woolf remarked, “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf, 1929). One of the study participants, Aria from Kolkata, said, “I want to stand on my own feet and establish my identity. I want a house for myself and envision a society where there is equality and all the women can do what they want.” The two quotes are from different geographical locations with a gap of almost 100 years. Yet, the underlying drive is to secure financial independence for women and a dedicated space where women can exercise freedom and have complete control over their resources.

Organisations such as Sakhi play an essential role in cultivating young women’s dreams of building a house. Support comes in different forms: loans, job opportunities within the organisation, or support

for the family while constructing the house. The idea of personal space is both physical and metaphorical. Personal space brings autonomy from the smallest to the biggest choices in life – from deciding the colour of curtains to establishing one’s identity as an individual in society.

5.2. The tribulations that persist

The young participants in the study expressed how they grappled with their education, financial situation, family responsibilities, and personal aspirations in the post-education phase of their lives. One of the participants, Raha, said, “However I look at it, when I think of higher education, it finally comes down to money and the situation of the family. How do I balance my home and education, and how do I use my skills? These are the questions that bother me. Also, I need to be emotionally strong and think that I, too, have a life.” Balancing academic aspirations, family responsibilities, and personal well-being is a complex task for Raha. She is in a dilemma whether she should continue her education or not. Her parents work as agricultural labourers. She has three sisters and one brother. She says, “When there are four daughters in a family, the pressure to get them married is immense.” Amidst all this, when there is a lack of resources, it is challenging to prioritise education, and it takes a backseat.

The young women and one gender non-binary participant also expressed that their idea of marriage and that of the family and community differ. For some study participants, it has become a source of disagreement in the family. Aisha says, “I just want to get married to an educated person so that I can fulfil my dreams.” Aisha’s idea of marriage is similar to the opening idea of Nivedita Menon’s work, *Seeing Like a Feminist*: “If marriage is considered the end of life, how can it be considered the goal of life” (Menon, 2012, p.1). Aisha sees marriage as continuing the journey that leads to fulfilling her dreams.

Based on their educational backgrounds and understanding of social structures, developed through meetings and workshops in the associated organisations, the participants view marriage as a partnership, where resources are pooled together and spent strategically. Most young women participants in the study come from socially and economically marginalised backgrounds; therefore, they want to work towards a life that has comparatively fewer financial challenges. One of the participants said, “I want to get educated and work. After marriage, my partner and I will work, and that way, we will be able to save money. A family managed by one person faces difficulties; we will not be facing that problem, and we will be able to save money also.”

The barriers to quality education and decent employment and pay continue to exist for the study participants in their post-education journeys. There are innumerable negotiations that are made on an everyday basis and moments struggle as the young women seek hope and resilience to continue their journeys. Despite these challenges, the study participants continue to stand firm with determination to live their dreams and achieve their goals. While, this study celebrates the resilience of the young women and one gender non-binary participant, it is highly critical of the systemic and structural barriers shaped by one's gender, caste, class, religious and geographical identities. These entrenched inequalities continuously obstruct their pathways to a decent and dignified life.

Being Co-Dreamers: Mentors and Organisations

In this chapter, we explore the intersections in the journeys of organisations, mentors, and young women and one gender non-binary person and shed light on the narratives of the mentors – the ‘co-dreamers’. We call them co-dreamers because they have enabled the young participants from marginalised communities to realise their dream of higher education. Mentors support these young aspirants physically (accompanying them to educational institutions during enrolments), emotionally (listening to their challenges and dilemmas and helping them navigate difficult conversations), and financially (offering fees support and providing books and stationery from their organisations). As discussed in the previous chapters, young women from marginalised communities needed the support of several social actors – families, peers, and social networks (including teachers and senior students). Each of these relationships is exclusive in nature; however, the mentor–mentee’s relationship is an amalgamation of all relationships.

In this chapter, we focus on mentors’ perspectives to understand the complexities of mentoring, their motivation, and the challenges they face in the process. We recognise that mentors also represent organisations and their larger strategic visions for youth engagement; however, we find them a crucial bridge between organisational strategies and the support young women receive. We examine how mentors’ life experiences shape their guidance, making them empathetic and understanding of the structural challenges their mentees face. Additionally, this looks at how organisational mentorship strategies evolve as mentors learn from their mentees’ journeys. Further, it examines the complex realities mentors must navigate, balancing institutional limitations, societal pressures, and the personal struggles of the young women they support.

We interviewed 12 mentors from 6 organisations across India for the study; 7 mentors came from the SC community, 2 were Muslim, and 3 chose not to mention their caste. Eight of them were women, and four were men. Talking to the mentors also revealed the journey of their organisations. Through the mentors, we understood how organisations empower their mentors with the flexibility to develop context-sensitive ways to approach issues as one works on the ground. Regulations based on limited staff, funding, and project deadlines determine the extent of mentors’ engagement. Despite these challenges, just as the study participants persevere in their educational journeys, mentors persevere in co-dreaming with several young people, helping them attain their educational dreams.

6.1. Pathways to becoming a mentor: Negotiations and learnings

Each mentor's journey illustrates the significant push factors supporting the educational journeys of young women from marginalised communities. Most of the mentors in the study come from marginalised backgrounds, and their experiences in school, entry into higher education, and persistence in higher education institutions mirror many of the challenges discussed in earlier chapters that young women also navigate. When mentors belong to the same community as their mentees, it offers distinct advantages compared to when they are outsiders.

Ravi is a 31-year-old man from the Mushahar community in Dhanarua block (Patna district, Bihar). He believes he can relate to the issues of young people from the community because he has gone through the same experiences. In the interview with the research team, he referred to the low literacy rate in his community and how it is even lower for women. Low literacy is one of the major factors that motivated Ravi to mentor young people from marginalised communities. He has a bachelor's in Computer Applications from a nearby town. It was extremely challenging for his family to arrange for funds for his tuition fees in the second and third years of his education when his scholarship was discontinued for unknown reasons. After graduation, he did not find any employment or an opportunity to continue his education. Eventually, he started working with an organisation and became interested in career guidance. He used to go through the monthly issues of the *Nayi Dishayein* magazine on opportunities in education and employment. Now, Ravi works as a Youth Mentor for young people from the Mushahar and Paswan communities in the villages of Nadvan and Maduvan. In conversations with the research team, he shared about his career prospects and that he had secured admission at Azim Premji University. His choice of discipline was an MA in Education because of his passion for working on the ground for the education of socially marginalised people in his region. During our 2023 field visit to Patna, Ravi was scheduled to start attending classes in a month.

Ravi's journey illustrates why it was relatively easier for him to converse with youth and young women's families about education, training, and workshops; what he says is received well because he hails from the same community.

In contrast, Naina's journey as a Youth Mentor is marked by her struggle to develop a rapport with the young women associated with the organisation. Naina comes from the Paswan or Dusaad community in Masaurhi, Patna. She started working with CSEI just after passing her Grade 12 examinations. Naina has completed her BA and aspires to continue her master's in a premier institute. She was introduced to the development sector when she joined CSEI. Initially, she struggled to sustain herself in

the organisation for two reasons. First, she belonged to the Paswan community, which is at the top of the Dalit hierarchy in Bihar; her interactions with other communities until then had been minimal. Therefore, she found it difficult to break the barriers of her social conditioning, especially concerning caste. Second, her Paswan identity was not well received by the young women who were already a part of the organisation. They were concerned that the organisation was making space for a ‘privileged’ youth who would squeeze the spaces they owned.

The turning point in Naina’s journey was when she attended a sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) workshop in the organisation. She overcame her feelings of discomfort during the workshop and went on to become an SRHR trainer within a few weeks. After this, she felt that she had to take the initial steps to develop a rapport with the youth from the Mushahar community. In due course, she established relationships with a few young women by devoting time and having conversations with them, although some bonds could never be made. Today, she feels that both sides could take more steps to move beyond caste identities and form relationships.

Whether the mentor will be viewed as an insider or an outsider to a community is difficult to determine at the outset. Sometimes, a mentor might be from a different religion or caste and yet find it easier to connect to their work based on gender. Nisha comes from a Jatt-Punjabi community in Alwar. She completed Grade 12 with multiple breaks and was pursuing a BA during the interview. There have been many barriers to Nisha’s education – community resistance, household responsibilities before and after marriage, and child care. Nisha has worked with AMIED for eight years, taking on different roles, such as teacher, mentor, and coordinator for different programmes. When Noor Mohammad contacted Nisha soon after she began working with AMIED to teach a group of young girls in Mirzapur, she instantly agreed that “there was a longing that women should study”. Nisha also says, “I understand what the girls go through because I have faced similar challenges in my life.” The challenges that Nisha had faced as a young woman in continuing her education are very similar to those faced by the participants in the study. Although the communities they come from are different, their everyday lives around household chores, care work, responsibilities, the undermining of women’s education, and the dismissal of young women’s aspirations are the same. However, she was hesitant and scared when she had to join the school as a teacher. She had never had any interaction with anyone from the Muslim community.

The complexities differ when the mentor and mentee come from different religious backgrounds. This suggests that individual identities shape the dynamics between mentor and mentee and can add multiple nuances to their relationship. For instance, the support she received from one of the members of the panchayat played a vital role in Nisha continuing to teach the girls in the village nearly eight years ago.

Though their experiences stemming from caste and religious identities significantly influenced the journeys of Ravi, Nisha, and Naina as mentors, they are equally committed to enabling young people to access learning spaces and pursue their education. In the case of Ravi and Nisha, their passion for working on issues around education serves as a major motivation to continue as mentors. Ravi envisions a brighter future for the Mushahar community through education, while Nisha aims to make education more accessible for young women in her area. Meanwhile, Naina is driven by her aspirations for higher education and her commitment to fostering understanding among different communities.

6.2. Organisational struggles: Obstacles encountered by organisations

In the previous chapters, we examined how young women faced structural and systemic barriers to their higher educational journeys. In this section, we look at the different obstacles organisations encounter. As young women negotiate with families and communities to access organisations, mentors play an essential role in supporting their efforts. In this section, we explore the journey of mentors in helping young women attain their educational goals.

The process of cultivating dreams around education is more complex in rural regions where information takes time to reach, and women are burdened by household chores, working in the fields, and undertaking care work for the family. In these situations, the mentors must maintain a close relationship with their mentees, regularly informing them about applications and exam forms, updating them on diverse opportunities such as fellowships and internships, and helping them fill out the application and exam forms. Nisha told us, “I have to keep informing the girls; otherwise, their year will get wasted.” However, Nisha also expressed that there are times when she forgets to inform a few young women because the area is too big for her; she is the only woman staff in the organisation working in the Mevat region in Rajasthan.

Nisha regrets that she could not inform a girl when the NIOS (National Institute of Open Schooling) issued their BA application forms in 2022. Later, the girl got married, and Nisha lost connection with her. If the girl had enrolled in a bachelor’s, she could have gained access to more opportunities. In these cases, when the mentors lose track of some of their students, it is primarily because they are overburdened with work in their organisations. Organisations also have limitations in terms of human resources, funds, and the need to manage various ongoing projects.

The other challenge mentors and organisations face is when mentees' choices contradict the organisations' norms and principles. While young women follow their dreams, organisations also try to understand them from their perspective. Radha, a mentor from Muskaan, shared the story of one of her mentees, Raj. Raj came from an Adivasi community in Bhopal. She used to stay in the Muskaan hostel and passed her Grade 10 examinations from NIOS. Amidst all this, Raj fell in love with a boy and ran away to get married. Both of them were underage at that time, which contradicted Muskaan's principles, which oppose child marriage. However, Radha shared with us how the organisation had to make space for the young people to make them feel accepted. She said, "I called Raj to inform her that the application forms for Grade 12 were out, and both (Raj and her husband) can come to Muskaan and fill out the forms."

The mentors act as the bridge between the organisation and the young participants, when the young participants' aspirations extend beyond what the organisation initially planned for. In some instances, organisations are able to take these into account and change their interventions, while at other times, there remain gaps in the support they can offer. Mentors occasionally chart new pathways for the organisation while also, at times, grappling with the limitations of what they can institutionally offer young women from marginalised communities. This dual role leaves mentors with a sense of fulfilment as they collectively work to create new and meaningful ways to support young women's journeys. However, they also experience the frustration and disappointment that comes with not being able to fully meet the needs of the young women.

Lily had dreams of pursuing her master's from premier institutes in India. However, the organisation had a different viewpoint on this – they felt that she should continue her studies at the regional institutes nearby. The organisation's viewpoint could be because of different reasons, such as the limited availability of financial and learning support to enter premier institutes. However, Lily decided to continue her education at a premier institute as it would allow her access to better avenues. She went on to prepare for the TISS and APU entrance exams. She was offered admission in both but could not get a 100% scholarship in TISS; therefore, she went on to pursue her MA in Education from APU.

Lily's decision broadened the scope of organisational interventions in the region. Referring to Lily, one of the mentors proudly said, "she went to APU and now works with a non-profit organisation in Bangalore. She also aspires to study outside the country." With the organisation's intervention, a four-generation Devadasi tradition broke with Lily getting an education and finding decent employment. The sixteen-year-long intervention with Lily and her family, with hostel support for one sister, finding a job for the mother, finding part-time work for both sisters as they continued to study, supporting and coaching Lily to enter a premier institution of higher learning cultivated and expanded Lily's dreams, which simultaneously opened more ways of approaching women's education.

It is also essential to recognise the harsh reality organisations face in balancing the desire to support the diverse career aspirations of young women with limited organisational resources. Mentor Malashree from Nishtha says, “Many of our students want to study medicine or become air hostesses. We aren’t able to support them because the tuition fees for these courses are very high. We don’t have that much money in the organisation.”

Ensuring young women arrive and sustain in higher education is a lot of work for mentors and organisations. There are difficulties and frustrations along the way. Meera, the founder and mentor of Sakhi, has been working with young women, particularly Devadasi women, on education and livelihoods for more than 20 years now. Considering the efforts put in by the organisation over the years, she feels that there could have been more success stories. Referring to the situation both within and outside of the communities the young women come from, she recognises the barriers to their social advancement. She expresses that there is a linear way of thinking amongst the people in the community about education and livelihood. She says, “for some families, only a government job can be considered a job.” Such notions act as barriers to seeking opportunities for young women. While, for people outside of the community, which majorly constitutes the privileged caste and class, the upliftment of the Devadasi women in the region acts as a threat. When Sakhi was involved in creating livelihoods the Devadasi women through cattle rearing, some said, “if these women grow, we will shave off half of our moustache.” Postures such as these increase the challenges the Devadasi community faces in the Hospete region and Sakhi.

Meera also said, “Youth work is changing. I feel it is becoming more challenging.” On the one hand, fewer young women join and continue pursuing higher education despite the efforts put of organisations. On the other hand, additional complexities arise when young women get into romantic relationships that the family and community resist strongly. Meera’s colleague, Saira, also shared how one young woman eloping led to restrictions on many other young women. Therefore, navigating a field where the choices of young women and the notions of the family and community co-exist is complex.

Despite different challenges, the strategies adopted by the organisations and mentors, along with the will of the young women themselves, ensured they continued with their higher education.

6.3. Continuing mentoring: Working around complexities

The young participants in the study come from socially marginalised backgrounds. The most important aspect of mentoring is understanding the social context of the mentees and the intersectionality of their different social identities (caste, class, religion, and gender). The stories of these young participants and their mentors illustrate how both parties find meaning in the interactions – they create a safe space for young women where they have the liberty to share their life experiences. We could identify two sets of complexities based on the narratives of the mentors interviewed in this study. The first major complexity is that the mentors have to balance the need for family acceptance while negotiating the young women's autonomy within patriarchal or conservative family structures and challenging traditional gender roles. The second major complexity is empowering young people to explore new spaces and opportunities while supporting them in coping with culturally alienating educational spaces.

Ravi says, “I feel like a bridge between the young women and their families.” For him, bridging the gap between young women and their families is a two-fold process – it involves a lot of responsibility on the part of the mentor and a sense of satisfaction that comes with making education a little less inaccessible for young women. However, mentors invest significant efforts in the process, which might be emotionally challenging for them sometimes. Ravi shared in the interview, “...whenever a young woman is late in the evening, I get a call from the family on her whereabouts.” As a mentor, Ravi has to constantly negotiate with families, along with the negotiations made by the young women on their part.

It is important to note that preventing young women from accessing higher education due to the fear of what they might do ‘in the name of college’ was a constant concern across regional contexts. Navigating the possibility of them entering into romantic relationships was complex. Organisations and mentors equally struggled to determine how to navigate the complex terrain of respecting individual women's choices, arguing with communities that higher education need not mean that a woman will ‘stray’, and respecting the autonomy of young women.

One of the mentors, Saira, shared how the organisation prepared a group of young women to travel to get admission to a reputed higher educational institution in a metropolitan city. Since it was not a single individual but a group travelling together 300 km, the arrangement reassured the families. However, the day before the women were scheduled to board the bus, one of the young women ran away with a boy. The mentor shared the problematic situation that put her and the organisation in. While they, as youth workers, respected the choice this young woman had made, it also meant a lot of difficulties for them since they now had to convince the other parents (of women to travel to the university) all over again that they were still making the right choice for their daughters.

For the few participants who attended premier higher educational institutes, language barriers and cultural differences were sources of immense stress, making it difficult for them to complete their courses with decent grades. This led to low self-esteem in some young women. Mentorship from organisations and mentors who listened to their experiences, issues, and concerns were crucial forms of support for the women to regain their sense of self-worth and confidence. The mentors sometimes offered solutions; at other times, they listened. Having constant communication with mentors was a crucial form of support for the participants. Mentors also adopted innovative strategies – they connected mentees to other mentors in the network when they could not support them for any reason. This strategy worked quite well in the context of Ekalavya in Yavatmal, which has a network of 300+ mentors for students from vulnerable backgrounds.

This chapter highlights the resilience of the study participants, their mentors, and organisations despite structural and systemic barriers. Together, they are creating pathways for marginalised young women to pursue higher education and, in the process, question, challenge, and reshape the educational landscape in India.

Conclusion

Pathways for Young Women: Higher Education and Beyond is a research study that illuminates the multifaceted challenges faced by young women and one gender non-binary participant between the ages of 16 and 35 years from socially and economically marginalised backgrounds in their pursuit of higher education. From the early stages of schooling to completing higher education, these young women have had to navigate a complex landscape filled with economic constraints, societal pressures, and institutional barriers. Despite these challenges, their stories shine with resilience and courage.

Throughout their schooling, the study participants struggled with social norms that viewed education as a secondary priority to marriage, household responsibilities, and care work. They faced harassment and a lack of infrastructural support, which posed significant barriers to education. However, the participants refused to be pushed out of the system and completed their primary and secondary education.

The sustained financial and emotional support that the participants receive from various organisations stresses the need for long-term community engagement to ensure young women from marginalised communities succeed in educational institutions. Study participants also receive support from their peers, mentors, and families, particularly their mothers, who emerge as key supporters. Despite this support, young women have had to continually negotiate with families, communities, and systemic challenges, such as obtaining proper paperwork. Furthermore, subject choices impact educational trajectories. For marginalised students, the journey to higher education requires extra support to bridge opportunity gaps. We also see that educational dreams are not individual but shared ones, reflecting the aspirations of families, peers, and communities for a better life.

Many young women face new challenges upon entering higher educational institutions, including language barriers, social exclusion, and the feeling of being outsiders in elite academic spaces. The pressures to marry intensify especially as they attain the legal age of marriage; however, with aspirations for a better life, the young participants keep going.

The participants mostly preferred careers in teaching, nursing, or government jobs; their choices were influenced by gender, caste, and societal expectations. Despite systemic barriers and family pressures, they strive for financial independence, autonomy, and equality while grappling with limited employment opportunities post-education. Their narratives reflect their persistent struggles as they seek to balance education, family responsibilities, and personal aspirations.

The mentors, referred to as ‘co-dreamers,’ understand the lived realities of the young women and one gender non-binary person. Their personal experiences in navigating their educational journeys and their commitment to social justice shape their approach to mentoring. While the roles played by NGOs and mentors are vital, the study also highlights the limitations these organisations have, including limited funding and staffing and the pressure of project deadlines. Despite these constraints, mentors and organisations continuously adapt, learning from the experiences of young women.

This study aims to ignite further discussions on the intersections of gender, caste, class, and religion in higher education. To truly transform the educational landscape, we must pay attention to such narratives, recognise the diverse experiences of marginalised young women, and work towards creating equal opportunities for all. While we recognise that continuous work is necessary at the familial, societal, and institutional levels to make higher education more meaningful for marginalised women students, we realise that some systemic interventions are required to facilitate their scaling up.

The state’s role remains crucial alongside civil society actors in this context. Key interventions by the state and civil society should include efforts to expand career guidance programmes to support young women in exploring career options beyond their social conditioning and equipping them to identify accessible resources. Stakeholders should also address issues surrounding public transport and introduce more initiatives, such as providing free bus passes or cycles, as mobility is a significant barrier to education for young women.

This report foregrounds how organisational (civil society) interventions are critical to enabling women from marginalised communities to access education. As civil society, it is important that we strengthen our advocacy for greater educational equity. This includes measures to cultivate educational aspirations among young people from marginalised communities and provide meaningful career guidance. It also includes strengthening scholarships and other existing affirmative mechanisms to boost inclusion in higher education. At the same time, state governments should significantly scale up their interventions.

These suggestions emerge from our engagements with the young women and one gender non-binary participant and by listening to their voices. There is a need to listen more and learn from young women, their families, and mentors to strengthen access to higher education. We write in solidarity with young women from diverse marginalised communities in India, committed to sustaining the fight against structural barriers and inequities in higher education.

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Appendix

1.1. List of young women and one gender non-binary participant (supported by organisations)

S.No.	Pseudonym	Age	Caste	Education	Current education/employment
1	Zara	19	OBC	BA Political Science	MA Urdu
2	Aisha	20	OBC	Grade 12 (Arts)	BA
3	Farida	18	OBC	BA B. Ed.	BA, BEd
4	Elena	19	SC	Grade 12 (Arts)	BA
5	Nemat	20	OBC	Grade 12 (Arts)	BA
6	Tara	23	SC	Grade 12 (Arts)	BA Sociology
7	Ria	23	SC	Grade 12 (Arts)	BA Sociology
8	Priya	19	SC	Grade 12 (Arts)	BA History
9	Shweta	20	SC	Grade 12 (Science)	BSc
10	Bano	19	OBC	Grade 12 (Science)	BSc Physics Hons
11	Anika	21	ST	Grade 12 (Arts)	BA
12	Natasha	23	OBC	MA	MA
13	Ananya	23	ST	BA	MA
14	Suma	21	ST	Grade 12 (Science)	BSc
15	Meena	23	SC	BA	MA
16	Rashmi	25	ST	LLB	Practising Law
17	Sara	21	ST	Grade 12 (Arts)	BA
18	Asher	19	NM ¹	Grade 12 (Arts)	Exploring Career Options

¹ NM: not mentioned.

19	Hasna	18	ST	Grade 12 (Arts)	Exploring Career Options
20	Anjali	21	ST	Grade 12 (Arts)	BA
21	Afsha	24	ST	Grade 12 (Arts)	Homemaker
22	Padma	20	Gen	Grade 12 (Arts)	BA Bengali Hons
23	Aria	22	Gen	BA Political Science	MA Education
24	Anabiya	21	NM	BA	BEd
25	Samreen	21	OBC	Grade 12 (Arts)	BA
26	Fatima	21	OBC	Grade 12 (Arts)	BEd
27	Sahana	38	SC/ST	PhD	Organic agriculturist
28	Supriya	33	NM	PhD	Lecturer
29	Yasmin	26	Gen	MBA	Corporate sector
30	Isha	30	SC	MA	Development sector
31	Lily	28	SC	MA Education	Development sector

1.2. List of young women participants not receiving any support from organisations

S.No.	Pseudonym	Age	Caste	Education	Current Education/Employment
1	Ira	30	NM	MPhil Geography	PhD Women's Studies
2	Srishti	25	SC	MSc Electronic Media	MSc Electronic Media
3	Manzil	28	SC	MA Women's Studies	PhD
4	Ishita	26	OBC	BA Electronics and Communication	Working in BSNL as a Tester
5	Sneha	23	ST	MA Women's Studies	Vidushi Fellowship

1.3. List of young women participants in the Focus Group Discussions (supported by organisations)²

S.No.	Pseudonym	Age	Caste	Education	Current Education/Employment
1	Anjum	21	OBC	BA Geography Hons	BA Geography Hons
2	Rohini	32	ST	Grade 12 (Arts)	Cook
3	Raha	21	ST	Grade 12 (NM)	Exploring Career Options
4	Maryam	20	OBC	BA	BA
5	Rishika	19	SC	BA	BA
6	Chanda	22	NM	NM	NM
7	Shikha	21	ST	Grade 12 (Arts)	Teacher
8	Palak	20	ST	Grade 12 (Arts)	Homemaker
9	Gudiya	22	SC	BA History Hons	Exploring Career Options

1.4. List of mentors who participated in the study

S.No.	Pseudonym	Age	Caste	Education
1	Nisha	35	SC	B Ed
2	Ismail	50	OBC	NM
3	Naina	21	SC	BA

² There were other young women who participated in the Focus Group Discussion, however the narratives of the ones given in the table could only be incorporated in this report.

4	Ravi	29	SC	BCA
5	Mohan	29	SC	MA
6	Kajal	25	SC	MA
7	Radha	34	SC	BEd
8	Sanjay	38	OBC	MA, BEd
9	Meera	42	NM	PhD
10	Saira	38	OBC	MA MEd
11	Sujata	52	Gen/OBC	MA
12	Dipika	53	Gen/OBC	Grade 10

1.5. Profile of the organisations that participated in the study³

Partner Organisation	Focus Group	Research Engagements
Alwar Mewat Institute of Education and Development (AMIED)	AMIED works towards quality education for girls from Muslim, Dalit, and Tribal communities in the Alwar and Mevat regions of Rajasthan. Other work areas include sexual and reproductive rights, water and sanitation, child protection, and gender. Community engagement is one of the foremost strategies adopted by the organisation for advocacy for women's education.	Interviewed Five young women Two mentors Conducted one focus group discussion

³ There is one gender non-binary participant in the study. In view of not breaching confidentiality, we do not specify the organisation they are associated with.

Centre for Social Equity and Inclusion (CSEI)	CSEI works with socially excluded communities in Patna, Bihar, for their social, economic, and cultural rights. CSEI follows the 5R concept for social equity inclusion. These are recognition, representation, respect, reparation, and reclamation. A component of their work is mentoring young people to enter institutions of higher learning and continue their education.	Interviewed Five young women Two mentors Conducted one focus group discussion
Eklavya India Foundation	Eklavya is based in Yavatmal, Maharashtra, and promotes quality higher education for first-generation learners from marginalised communities, including Dalits, Adivasis, de-notified, nomadic, and semi-nomadic tribes, and OBCs.	Interviewed Five young women Two mentors Conducted one focus group discussion
Muskaan	Muskaan engages with the urban poor, children, and young people from de-notified, nomadic, and semi-nomadic tribes in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. Muskaan's understanding of higher education is to help students get into degree courses based on their interests and choices. Working mainly with first-generation schoolgoers, the first step for nomadic communities to enter higher education is to complete Grade 12.	Interviewed Six young women Two mentors Conducted two focus group discussions

Nishtha	Nishtha is committed to attaining equal rights, opportunities, and dignity for women in rural Bengal. It focuses on school dropouts among girls due to economic and social problems and also on the problems that await when girls dropout of school, such as early marriage, trafficking in the guise of marriage or work, and domestic violence.	Interviewed Five young women Two mentors Conducted one focus group discussion
Sakhi Trust	Sakhi works with adolescent girls and youth from marginalised communities, especially in the Vijayanagara district, Karnataka. It aims to bring an end to casteism, gender discrimination, and violence and abuse in the area. It has helped several young women from Devadasi families and Dalit communities to enter and complete higher education by offering financial and other forms of support to individual women, as well as their families.	Interviewed Five young women Two mentors Conducted one focus group discussion