

Participatory Ethnography Action Research for Musahar Girl's Education (PEAR-MGE)

Introduction

The Musahar community, belonging to the Dalit castes, is one of the most marginalised groups in Nepal. Almost all Musahar households (around 99%) are entirely landless. Musahar families/members are engaged as bonded labourers even though the Government of Nepal has initiated rehabilitation programmes for former bonded labourers. The education status of the Musahar community is very poor with 93% of people unable read and write. In this context, this participatory ethnographic action research study has been conducted to explore the caste-centric structural obstacles to girls' education. We looked at the vulnerability of Musahar girls through the lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality is a feminist framework that helps to understand the multiple forms of oppression faced by people based on their gender, class, race, ethnicity, income, disability, caste, etc. For instance, a Musahar girl is oppressed and marginalised by virtue of her multiple identities of being a girl (gender), Musahar (Dalit caste identity), class (poor) and income (low family income). These identities intersect and interact with each other to cause multiple levels of discrimination. The aim of the study was to explore the caste-centric structural obstacles that affect access to education by applying ethnography combined with participatory action research methods in support of Tetra Tech and FCDO. The study had an overall duration of 1 year and 3 months, beginning on October 1, 2021, and ending in December 2022 where 50 female Musahar Field Researchers and 10 Lead Researchers were mobilised for data gathering in the field for a period of 1.5 months (i.e., 22nd June to 7th August 2022) in Sunsari, Saptari, Siraha, Dhanusha and Mahottari districts of Nepal.



Key Findings



Several factors limited girls' access to education, however, these were all strongly grounded in the economic hardships households faced. As a result, barriers range from girls' personal interests and outlook towards education to a lack of commitment and concentrated efforts at the system level to uplift the Musahar community's socio-economic conditions.

Economic hardship: Household-level poverty is the most common and most important barrier to Musahar girls not enrolling in school and dropping out. Girls' education chances are reduced due to extremely limited household resources and low household income, girls' domestic workload, the high opportunity cost of educating girls, and the indirect costs of education.

Attitudes of parents towards girls' education: The influence of families was a critical factor behind why girls had dropped out of school or had never been to school. Parents do not typically associate education with increased economic opportunities and therefore are not ready to give it the priority that education programme implementers expect them to. In this regard, their poor financial status pushes them to spend most of their time with labour work, which for them generates immediate value and meets their current survival needs. Therefore, parents want their daughters' time to be invested in either taking care of siblings, livestock and household chores such as cooking food, cleaning dishes and clothes, fetching water, etc. or labour work.

School-related factors: Schools play vital roles in ensuring continued access to education. The government of Nepal ensure compulsory and free education up to a basic level and free education at secondary level as guaranteed by the constitution of Nepal. The distance of the school from the community was a key factor; as well as unfavourable, discriminatory and in some cases abusive teacher behaviours creating dehumanising conditions for Musahar girls, which was seen as a major barrier. In addition, worse school environments for them (more mistreatment from peers resulting in bullying, casteist slurs and isolation related to their caste) cause many girls to drop out and never return. Another factor at the school level was found to be the traditional teaching style with limited student-teacher interaction. This limited girls' learning and, in some cases, completely discouraged them from continuing their schooling as they lagged further and further behind in comparison to other students. Finally, poor school infrastructure such as classrooms, benches, tables, toilets, and drinking water also prevented girls' access and attendance in schools.

Negative effects of coping mechanisms addressing economic hardships and structural barriers: The research acknowledged the significance of socio-cultural norms, however, after sufficient consideration, it seems such norms are shaped in response to structural circumstances or conditions [Aslam et al. 2020]. In the context of the Musahars, and Musahar

girls in particular, we found that extreme economic hardship caused and perpetuated by caste-based oppression shapes their life decisions, guides their socio-cultural norms and ultimately impacts their attitudes and approaches to education. Early marriage, alcoholism leading to domestic violence, and differential attitudes towards boys' and girls' education present themselves as a consequence of limited economic opportunities, which keep the community entrapped in bonded labour and generational poverty.

Policies and practices for access to education: National, provincial, and local level policies, plans, programmes, and practices all play a crucial role in improving access to education for the most marginalised girls. However, except for some national level provisions and commitments and a few provincial interventions such as *Beti Bachau and Beti Padhau* (Save Daughter and Teach Daughter) targeted toward girls and marginalised communities, municipal and school-level efforts are not designed and implemented effectively. Enrolment campaigns and seasonal door-to-door activities were not found to be effective and meaningful enough to motivate marginalised girls to attend school and access education over a period of time.

Recommendations

To address these complex issues that affect Musahar girls' access to education, we propose the following recommendations: (1) more provisions and programmes by the government and development partners targeted towards uplifting Musahars' economic conditions, as a direct long-term investment that enable Musahar girls' education; (2) increased investments in establishing schools as safe spaces for the most vulnerable Musahar girls; (3) support vital birth registration for undocumented Musahar people as a key step towards school enrolment and accessing a range of government and other provisions; (4) intersectional interventions to complement the education of the Musahar girls.