

Article

Voices of Women within the Devanga Community, Bangalore, India

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Abstract: Women face a unique set of challenges in India on account of traditionally held views of their gender, as well as often having lower educational and community status. Gender discrimination has continued to remain an evil in our society. Almost 70% women in South Asia are married at a young age, which is coupled with early childbearing and a lack of decision-making abilities within the traditional family structures, further enhancing their “disadvantaged” position in society. In India, the relationship of status and patriarchal values in addition to the deprived status of women worsens the situation. Despite advances having been made in the active participation of women in the political and economic domain, not much change has been seen in incidences of gender discrimination or dominant patriarchy. Daily interactions ensure that gender stereotypes have a strong influence on our values, judgements and evaluations to an extent that men and women are treated differently in society. A small weaving community, the Devanga community, which has its roots spread across India, practices stereotypes and patriarchal norms which have ensured the existence of male dominance in almost every aspect of decision making. The position of women within this community is worthy of debate and discussion, although no prior research has been conducted on this issue within the Devanga community. This paper draws upon the voices of women from within this community to understand the various levels of discrimination faced by them on a regular basis, along with highlighting male privilege as a cause of perpetuated discrimination and lesser opportunities for girls compared with boys. The reported research study analyzed data obtained from 120 women from the Devanga community through semi structured questionnaires and interviews and adopted an ethnographic feminist perspective to interpret these data. Findings indicate that the voices of women within this community are suppressed due to contributory factors such as orthodox beliefs and practices, male dominance, early marriage, and domestic responsibilities and all of these can be viewed as a barrier to providing educational opportunities to girls. Findings suggest that despite the progress made by women in India, they are still considered to be the single largest group of backward citizens.

Keywords: stereotypes; status of women in India; gender discrimination; feminist research



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1. Introduction: Purpose of the Study

Women’s emancipation continues as a subject of interest, predominantly because of the subordination and repression experienced by many. The struggle for liberation continues because women’s progress cannot be addressed in isolation from other political and socioeconomic factors. It has been suggested that contemporary India with its unique heritage and cultural history continues to remain a patriarchal society where predominantly women carry the burden of family heritage [1]. Several debates are ongoing about the situation of women in India and because of this, gender inequality has now become one of the most widely discussed subjects in Government and Non-Government organizations with an immediate identified need to eliminate all forms of inequality against women [2].

Though women’s education is a highly debated topic of importance, it continues to remain an area of contention [3]. Researchers such as Madigan [4] reported that despite

girls being raised to assume roles such as that of a wife and mother, the enforcement of equal access legislation has tremendously increased their options. However, in several parts of the world, there are evident gaps between where girls' education is and where it should be [5]. The study reported in this paper is based on this premise with acknowledgement that the education of girls is understood and interpreted in several different ways by the members of the community investigated. This paper aimed at understanding the lives and roles of women within a weaving community in India, the Devanga community, to provide them with an opportunity to have their voices, experiences and life stories heard. In doing so, a specific focus was maintained on gaining an insight into the educational opportunities provided to women and girls in this community as it would help in gaining an understanding of their roles in society.

At the onset of this study, the researcher believed that women of the Devanga community were conditioned into being submissive as well as to follow patriarchal societal rules before and after marriage. This coupled with deficits in women's power and voices makes the gender inequality situation worse. In India, sons are considered more important than daughters to ensure the masculine parental lineage, and this practice is followed strongly within the Devanga community. A good understanding of this aspect demands an investigation into how gender bias is experienced and maintained within the families of the Devanga community, and the way it is reinforced through various social, cultural and traditional contexts. The Devanga community is a small weaving community which has its roots spread across several states in India. There are several theories on the emergence of this community, and it is believed that because of the prevalent caste system and social conditions in India they became an endogamous weaving unit. According to several ancient texts, members of this community hold significant authority over a range of religious practices and customs; however, there is no literature that provides evidence for this community following strict gender norms and stereotyped rules. Having understood the patriarchal rules followed by this community, it was imperative that the researcher generated sufficient data that can be used to support women in this community to find their voices and be aware of their basic rights as individuals. The researcher cannot be seen as being totally neutral, being a member of this community and holding preconceived ideas that orthodox ideas and prejudiced norms should be confined to the past. This situation is not unusual in feminist research that adopts a socio-ethnographic approach and requires close observations of the phenomena under scrutiny in order to provide data that are trustworthy and can be verified by reference to the data presented in this study. An important motivating factor for the researcher was to provide a clearer understanding of the educational opportunities afforded or denied to a sample of women, which might ultimately assist them in gaining improved life chances in the future.

The gender roles of women in India have been broadly studied under the headings of marriage and motherhood [6] factors that have shaped their identities in society. Looking from a cultural perspective, motherhood is viewed as an essence of womanhood, and though this along with marital status is rightly seen as important, the researcher feels the current interpretation of these terms restricts and regulates women's lives [7]. An unspoken and unheard voice was discussed by Armstrong [8] wherein the focus is on those people whose lives have been affected the most in terms of marginalization. Armstrong [8] makes this reference in the field of special education, but the same can be contextualized to this research as the unspoken voices are those of the women in the community under investigation. These voices can be considered as being in need of being heard and listening to these voices may bring new perspectives to this research. Women of this community are known to be submissive in nature as well as abiding by the rules laid down by the male members of the community, though it is not clear as to what the consequences might be of not complying to the rules. In modern India, women are aware of their marginalized role in social structures and realize that they cannot overcome this deprived state until they receive social acceptance as an individual, especially by the male members of the family and society [9]. Women are regarded as "individuals in need of a male anchor" to provide

them with social and cultural acceptance. This raises a question about the role of education because women are constantly stifled by religious and social customs and find their lives torn between traditionalism and modernity. They seem to be unable to liberate themselves from the practices that are embedded as a major entity in society.

While viewing gender equality through the lens of human development, many Asia Pacific countries have made significant advances in this key development because women are able to outperform men in several domains. Despite these achievements, women in South-East Asia are still subjected to discriminatory activities because of higher vulnerability to poverty and their inability to access economic opportunities which further restricts their mobility in society.

Marriage has a significant impact on individual lives, especially those of women, which has led researchers and policymakers to consider marriage from a human rights perspective, especially due to considerations of consent and age at marriage. Despite the imposition of regulations, many women in developing countries including India are subjected to early marriage, most of the time, without choice. Child marriage or early marriage (marriage before 18 years) is a global concern and is a human rights violation which has affects girls across the globe. India, among other countries, remains among the top countries practicing child marriage [10]. Women who marry young tend to have lower education and lesser decision making power within their families, presumably because these marriages are coordinated and orchestrated by their families [11]. This has been a rising cause of concern, particularly in the Sub-Saharan African countries and South Asia, wherein almost 70% of the girls are married before attaining the legal age for marriage. This has been strikingly pervasive within the community reported in this paper and hence the need to investigate this aspect arose because of the potential health consequences it may have on these young women. Data from the Devanga community evidenced that though parents want their daughters to achieve academic ambitions, they are also worried, because educating girls translates into difficulty in finding a suitable groom which is a very important aspect for the parents. Girls well-versed with domestic skills increases their chances of finding a suitable groom, rather than educating them. Additionally, women who marry young may not be in a position to assert themselves or establish their position within their family due to their suppressed voices.

The goal of the research reported in this paper was to adopt an emancipatory approach into understanding the various factors that contribute to the suppression of women's voices and the consequences of this situation.

2. Materials and Methods

The current study was designed to provide voices to women whom the researcher believed were living disadvantaged lives. The research enabled the collection of data along with providing women a platform to have their stories heard without the researcher's own bias playing an influential role. Hence, a feminist stance was adopted because "feminism focuses on injustices that have historically developed and continue to exist in our society" [12]. Feminist researchers believe that this methodology requires the establishment of an emotional connection with the participants because there are multiple pathways to gaining scientific knowledge. From the viewpoint of the researcher, it was important to obtain all aspects of these women's lives such as their day-to-day functioning, their roles within the families as well as their husbands' roles and most importantly their childhood experiences related to gender discrimination and the provision of educational opportunities, in order to find the depth of this problem. The researcher believes that a woman's childhood experiences contribute largely to the expectations she has for her children, and if she made any differing provisions with regards to educational opportunities for her son compared with her daughter. Conforming to the societal norms of girls marrying young and, ensuring that women do not have freedom or financial independence are predominant influences within the Devanga community and the researcher believes that change needs to be implemented. Male dominance was also cited as a predominant factor

contributing to suppression of women by researchers such as [2] and the researcher also believes that women are perceived to require a male anchor to provide them emotional and social stability. The research sought to gain greater understanding on a woman's perceived role in a society which has been influenced by her childhood experiences with regards to the educational opportunities provided to her. This was investigated by adopting an approach which obtained data through different sources and to validate the findings appropriately. A combination of semi structured questionnaires, and semi structured interviews was chosen to respect the women's voices and opinions as well as to establish social relationships, while keeping feminist principles in mind. This decision was prompted by the intention to obtain a broad picture of the experiences and beliefs of women of the Devanga community whilst also developing a detailed account of these individuals' experiences. Women may have literacy equal to men, but they may lack the awareness to exercise their rights or in some cases may not even be aware of their rights, as reported in this paper. A dominant source of resistance to women's advancements comes from perceived male superiority and societal structures centered around it which may prevent women's voices from being heard.

A purposive sample of 120 mothers served as the focus of the initial questionnaire. The women approached to be a part of this study essentially fell into one common category of having two or more children (comprising both boys and girls). All the women included in the study essentially were within the age group of 25 to 60 years of age. Women were identified through community databases as well as familiar contacts. Having decided on the sample, the research instruments were designed to seek information on these women's childhood experiences and the impact of these on their lives. The purpose of developing questionnaires was to ensure that questions would be interpreted the same way by every participant thus enabling them to respond accurately and willingly [13]. A combination of close and open-ended questions was used to enable women to provide their demographic details as well as have the freedom to use their own language to answer questions about their childhood and motherhood (many would use Kannada as their first language). Based on their responses in the questionnaires, women were further categorized into three distinct groups based on their educational qualifications.

The intention behind segregating women was not undertaken with the purpose of differentiating them but to explore the role of education and its influence on their understanding of their role in society.

In order to avoid conflict between the researcher and the researched population as well as to maintain their rights and confidentiality, the researcher adhered to established ethical procedures. This was ensured by distributing information sheets and informed consent forms to all the participants prior to administration of questionnaires. The information sheets provided details about the context of this study and why it was being conducted while the informed consent form sought written consent by the participants to ensure they had read and fully understood the reasons for conducting this study before their participation.

Of the 120 questionnaires distributed, 96 were returned from which 75 women consented to being interviewed. The returned questionnaires on analysis revealed that participants appreciated that their opinions were being sought and respected which possibly provided them the required encouragement to fill the questionnaires as well as consent to participate in the interviews.

Semi structured interviews were conducted with the participants to obtain in-depth information on sensitive areas of their lives which would also provide the participants the freedom to steer the discussion towards issues that were of relevance to them within the scope of the study [14]. Of the 75 women who consented to be interviewed, three women chose to withdraw from the research as their husbands were aware of their participation and the women feared trouble. Five women requested to be called at a later time but when they were called there was no response which was also recorded as having withdrawn from the research and the remaining four women wanted to be interviewed "just for fun", obviously having not understood the seriousness of conducting a research of this

nature. This left the researcher with 63 women: 42 who were interviewed one-to-one and 21 telephonically.

Instilling confidence in interviewees is of the utmost importance along with using comfortable and non-intrusive language while addressing sensitive topics. Scrutinizing their childhood experiences through the questionnaires and interviews provided data on aspects of gender discrimination faced by the participants in their childhood as well as a lack of encouragement in pursuing academic and non-academic ambitions which eventually led to their suppression, both emotionally and physically. Probing questions to understand the life experiences of the women, impacting their perceptions of their role in society, involved asking questions about their treatment by their husbands' families, their opinion on their role in society and where they position themselves in that role. This was a sensitive topic for most women but having developed a high level of trust with the participants ensured honest and trustworthy responses. Some researchers [15] have mentioned the importance of maintaining trust and confidence with participants because it can have a positive impact on sharing personal and sensitive information, which can also become a long-term relationship. In this paper, the researcher was required to reconstruct the past events in the lives of these women in order to be able to appreciate their current issues and such sensitive information can be managed effectively through interviews, which at times were shaped by the interviewees themselves; hence, they were regarded as active participants in the research process [14].

The importance of being a female researcher at this stage was evident. Being a woman placed the researcher in a better position because of the ease of being able to shape social relations which may not have been so easy for a male researcher.

3. Results

Based on discussions from interviews and questionnaires, along with a critical analysis of the literature, several prominent issues and themes emerged which are a cause of concern but may also point to positive actions that can be taken to improve the lives and opportunities of women in this community. Having transcribed all the interview and questionnaire data, aspects that related to childhood experiences were separated from the ones that considered expectations from children and perceived roles in society. Facets of women being dissatisfied with their lives, having received support/no support from spouses and lack of independence were clustered under the third theme. Hence, the main issues being addressed in this paper are:

- (a) Childhood experiences of women;
- (b) Expectations from children;
- (c) Role of women in the society.

Issues such as gender discrimination in childhood, childhood ambitions remaining unfulfilled, being subjected to over-protective parenting and allocation of funds towards the son's education were under the first theme. The second theme looked at issues of women having higher aspirations for sons, while some women had equal aspirations for sons and daughters. The last and final theme discussed aspects of women's perceptions of their roles and status in society and whether they were provided equal rights as men.

Though this study was conducted within a small community in Bangalore, several issues arose that require further exploration and understanding. Thematic analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data revealed that the birth of boys was preferred over girls, the major consequence of which is the discriminatory practices in educational opportunities and the suppression of women. A 33-year-old woman was subjected to psychological abuse to bear a third child because her first two children were girls. Despite the financial stability of the family being weak, she was compelled to bear another child as the family desired a "male-heir". She said: "My husband is a nice person, but he is completely dependent on his parents, he doesn't have the ability to think and act independently, so I just keep quiet. I cannot take any body's decisions because my in-laws don't understand all this. For my daughters I decide and sometimes ask my husband."

Three women in the sample emphasized the displeasure caused to their parents because they were born as a girl which eventually led to these women striving hard to make themselves self-reliant. Women also mentioned the desire to be treated equally to men and to be provided equal opportunities as men because a society such as the Devanga community currently believes in suppressing women rather than providing them with self-sustaining opportunities.

A 37-year-old woman is forcefully restricted to the house as her spouse is insecure of her mind being corrupted if she steps out. Her childhood was restricted as well because her parents believed in keeping girls home once they attained puberty.

Of the 63 women interviewed, 38 women mentioned that their freedoms are limited and are bound to strong stereotyped roles within the family. This is compounded by poverty because girls born in poor families are known to be married early in part because the demand for dowry is lower for younger girls [16]. This can be substantiated with the following excerpts: “We had ambitions of studying but our parents wanted us girls to get married as soon as possible”; “opportunities were lesser for us girls. I wanted to study but I wasn’t allowed to. My parents got me married early.”

Stereotyping and conditioning girls into gender specific roles was identified as another major finding. A 44-year-old participant of the study revealed that “when I was in eighth standard, I wanted to learn music/dance/instrument very badly, but my parents didn’t send me for anything. They never used to let us out of the house”. Another participant mentioned that “I just wanted to go out, but I was not sent, so we just grew up that way. Stayed inside the house and learned the domestic work. It was very clear, girls will study till 7th grade and boys till tenth grade. The reason for this was that once girls attained puberty they were not allowed outside the house”.

A total of 21 women in the study stated that women are better equipped than men to handle responsibilities at home and outside and would perform better in society if they were provided with equal educational opportunities. A 37-year-old woman said: “They (girls) should be left free; their desires should be fulfilled and should not be restricted to the four walls of the house. My husband doesn’t let me go out of the house because he feels if I socialize, my mind will get corrupted. Girls should be encouraged in everything by her parents, husband or in-laws. They should be taken care of well. They also deserve a good life that’s the only dream I have.”

Women in this study crave an equal status in society but are often told to “shut up” by the male members of the community because a woman’s voice is not meant to be heard. Even today women of this community are told not to voice their opinions especially in the public sphere because speaking in public is a “man’s job”. Women’s subordination and oppression is reflected in almost every aspect of society. To promote gender equality in a strongly patriarchal system such as India requires the consent of the male members. When women speak about gender equality, it seems more like seeking release from their repetitive restrictive life. In their understanding, letting women free of the domestic responsibilities of a “care giver” means gaining equal rights.

Having supportive partners may be considered as a positive factor in encouraging women to stand up for themselves and the data obtained revealed that some women have encouraging partners, but this issue has received little attention in the research literature. There is evidence such as those provided below to highlight the encouragement provided by the spouse:

“My husband also was very cooperative. After marriage he enrolled me into computer classes, spoken English class and finally beautician courses” and “My husband was very understanding and supportive in everything. He understood the difference in the way I was at my parents’ place and used to help out in everything”.

A majority of families in India, especially within the Devanga community, expect women to be subservient to their husbands and to remain submissive, a situation that could be termed psychological abuse because it is amalgamated with the lack of education and independence. Women additionally admitted to having developed feelings of guilt,

fear and inadequacy despite having the husbands' support (in some cases) because other members of the family play a significant role in creating conflict and disharmony. Citing one example to evidence this was a 33-year-old woman who was initially harassed by her husband's parents for having not brought sufficient dowry. Her inability to have a son after having borne two daughters resulted in her being forced to have a third child despite her lack of financial security to support three children (as mentioned above).

In another instance, a 48-year-old woman revealed that she was going through a very abusive marriage, both physically and psychologically and has been humiliated all her life, not just by her husband but by her son and daughters as well. Paying specific attention to this situation, violence was perpetrated by the spouse and the children and the lack of education and a support system resulted in her silently accepting the abuse.

In most cases such as these, women bear the abuse silently because it creates an uncomfortable situation discussing these aspects with an outsider as well as having no support from family.

4. Discussion

While trying to understand the intricacies of the Devanga community, the researcher wished to interrogate the roles played by women and how they perceived their positions in society. As evidenced in the data, women in this sample believed that they had been neglected from their childhood and continue to feel so, primarily because of their lack of participation in family decisions, poor educational background, and the inability to obtain freedom. Several studies have been conducted to understand the lives of women in rural India, but a study of this nature has not previously been conducted in India within an urban environment in which the researcher's aim was to focus on a woman's role and status in society and understand the various reasons why women are maintained in positions of subservience. A strong correlation was also identified between girls marrying early and educational attainment each negatively impacting the other. As shown in the results section, some women explicitly mentioned the unhappiness their birth brought to their families and growing up with a feeling of resentment was not easy. Having had no higher education, it was challenging to be assertive and find ways to sustain themselves. Education alone does not provide empowerment, but it is rather the will and attitude of empowering oneself that matters. Though women are becoming more aware of their rights as individuals, they also require support to be able to stand up for themselves. From the data obtained, it can be observed that there is a strong urge to rise beyond the role of a wife and mother to become a more economically and intellectually independent being. The indication of women being told to "shut up" reinforces the suggestions of Beard [17] who found that women are commonly expected to stay quiet and not voice their opinions. One might presume that these were behaviors of the past, but the data collected in this study evidences its presence in Indian society today. Talking in the public sphere is a man's domain, any woman doing the same is believed to bring dishonor to the family.

The results also indicated that some women have supportive partners and that this may be viewed as a positive impetus for the future generations of girls being able to pursue their ambitions. However, interference by other family members was also a finding in this study to be a behavior which restricts the spouse' support and results in women succumbing to traditional societal pressures.

5. Conclusions

Women's status continues to remain paradoxical and ironical in India and the Devanga community women fare no better than others. The picture is less positive when the education and literacy of girls in India is considered [18]. Despite the Indian economy growing so rapidly, the educational attainment of women in India continues to remain a cause of concern and debate. Several women within the Devanga community have begun to recognize the need to be provided equal rights and opportunities as men but find it difficult to disentangle themselves from the clutches of patriarchy and oppression.

There are several reasons for this including poverty, the lack of educational opportunities, and gender discrimination to name a few. Data obtained in this study also revealed that parents hesitate in providing educational opportunities to girls as it indirectly influences finding a suitable groom for her as no one within the Devanga community prefers an educated daughter-in-law. This also contributes to getting girls married at a very young age (32 women of the 63 interviewed were married very early). Evidence was indicative of women understanding the need to educate their daughters for them to be able to lead independent and successful lives in the future. However, the lack of courage and self-esteem eventually leads to them succumbing to societal pressures. The prevalence of dominant ideologies such as these, restricts girls and women to stereotyped roles which in turn leads to their devaluation in several aspects. A positive finding that emerged because of this was that women who have experienced childhood discrimination and a lack of opportunities have chosen to allow their daughters to decide their career paths. Though this may not seem a significant finding, the author finds it important because suppression in their childhood led to them having their ambitions denied; encouraging their daughters is a way of marking their own freedom and empowerment. Women have thus chosen to let their daughters decide their career paths rather than restrict them to the four walls of the house. Further research is required to understand whether girls were permitted to pursue their ambitions, especially by the male members of the family. One participant mentioned that women within the Devanga community are looked down upon and are backward in aspects of education and empowerment. Aware of this prejudiced system and orthodox beliefs, it will be a challenge to fight the system and stand up for girls' rights. Having understood the cultural nuances of this community, the author firmly believes that irrespective of any situation, it is quite challenging to fight these beliefs without adequate support. Disrespecting the rules laid down by the community members can bring in contempt and dishonor which the women are fearful of.

It would be helpful to discuss the findings of this research with the members of the community, especially with those male members who hold positions of authority and were instrumental in assisting with gaining access to the sample. Developing a support group would also prove helpful to address the existing prejudices and orthodox beliefs and ideologies by spreading the message that gender discrimination is a thing of the past and it is essential to provide women and girls with equal opportunities as men.

Conducting similar research with the male members of the community would throw more light on the reasons for the existence of these prejudiced ideas and would pave way for opening more avenues for improving the lives of the women of the Devanga community in the future. This study was conducted in a major city in South India; hence, the data obtained from this study cannot be generalized to the entire Devanga community spread across India. Replicating this research in other parts of India with the Devanga community women would also provide insight on whether this issue of women subordination and oppression exists only in Bangalore or if it is more widespread across India.

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