Research Article

Teachers' Perspective on Girls' Dropout from Schools and Actions to Support their Education in India: A Multi-centric Qualitative Study

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A B S T R A C T

Introduction: Access of girls to secondary education is poor, with a 16% dropout rate in India. The perspectives of teachers might help us understand the reasons for the same. Hence, we conducted a study to find out the perceptions of teachers regarding girls' dropping out of schools and the need for actions that can help in this regard.

Methods: We conducted a qualitative study across 11 districts in five states. The questionnaire had seven questions, out of which six were open-ended and one was close-ended, besides the questions on age, gender, and location. We performed content analysis. Purposive sampling was used to include 122 teachers in the intervention. The study was conducted between February and March 2021.

Results: There were 30 (24.6%) female and 92 (75.4%) male respondents. The survey revealed multiple factors at individual, family, school, and community levels, such as disinterested girls, poverty, negative parents' attitude, lack of infrastructure facilities in schools, and early marriage, etc. responsible for dropouts. Mothers' engagement was perceived as crucial in supporting girls' education.

Conclusion: A comprehensive, multi-level intervention with students, teachers, parents, and communities is required to help girls complete secondary education.

Keywords: School Dropouts, Female Literacy, School Teachers

Introduction

The right to education is the fundamental right granted to citizens by the Constitution and is codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 13(2)(a) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights made primary education free and compulsory for all. Article 13(2)(b) made secondary education available and accessible to all by every appropriate means, and, by the progressive introduction of free education.[1] Though the access to primary education in India is good with a 98% gross enrollment ratio and less than 2% dropout rate, there are gaps in accessibility and acceptability of secondary education with a 16% dropout rate and a deficit of 22% in the gross enrollment ratio.[2]

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School enrollment and dropout result from a meticulous series of processes or backgrounds, such as societal norms, parental education and attitude towards education, financial crisis, etc.[3] India, a country with diversity in culture, geography, environment, and availability of facilities, witnesses regional variance in the reasons for dropout of girls or boys.[4] States like Assam, Odisha, and Bihar have a higher dropout rate among girls and boys in secondary education compared to the national average.[3] In Assam, nearly one-third of adolescents drop out of schools at the secondary level. The dropout rate is even higher among adolescents from marginalised populations.[2] The dropouts have lesser chances of securing a job and are paid less income than high-school graduates.[4]

The Government of India has focused on improving girls' education and their enrollment in schools. Schemes like mid-day meals, scholarships for girls and marginalised populations, and cash incentives for educating girls have been implemented, and the government is improving the quality of education in schools.[5,6] However, studies highlighted several gaps in these schemes, including poor quality food in mid-day meals, lack of awareness among people about various schemes, and trained teachers to counsel adolescents about education, etc.[6,7] More commitment is warranted from the governments in terms of monetary investment, effective monitoring, and improvement in the quality of services for effective reach to the marginalised who need them the most.

Teachers are a cornerstone in uplifting or making a shift in the education system of India. The new education policy stated that teachers are at the centre of the fundamental reforms in the education system. The reforms include empowering teachers, ensuring respect and dignity, instilling accountability, equipping them with skills to promote students' holistic development and adopt the best pedagogy approaches, and ensuring involvement in managing governance in schools.[8] These reforms will help teachers bring change in the system, prevent girls from dropping out, and help dropouts reconnect with schools.[9] Good communication with students can help teachers understand their strengths, weaknesses, needs, and opportunities to formulate individual educational goals.[10]

Previous studies highlighted that teachers' perceptions are crucial to understanding girls' dropouts because, as education agents, they understand gender roles in society very well and their perceptions affect the success and paths of children studying in school.[11] Furthermore, teachers are more knowledgeable and can be provided in-service training on the appropriate teaching methods that are learner-centred and not gender-biased to promote girls' education.[12] Teachers have knowledge about school dropouts and, to a great extent, the reasons for the dropouts of their students, that's why their perspectives can help interventionists understand the problem and identify possible intervention strategies.[13]

Hence, teachers' perspectives will help us understand the reasons for dropouts and gender disparities in enrollment or dropouts. Besides being school teachers, they may be parents, and their personal experiences would provide insights into individual or environmental factors responsible for school dropout. Also, we lack adequate evidence, especially qualitative, on teachers' perspectives and their actions to support girls' education in India. Therefore, the objective of the study was to find out the perceptions of teachers regarding girls' dropout from schools, and actions that can help girls complete their secondary education in India using a qualitative method.
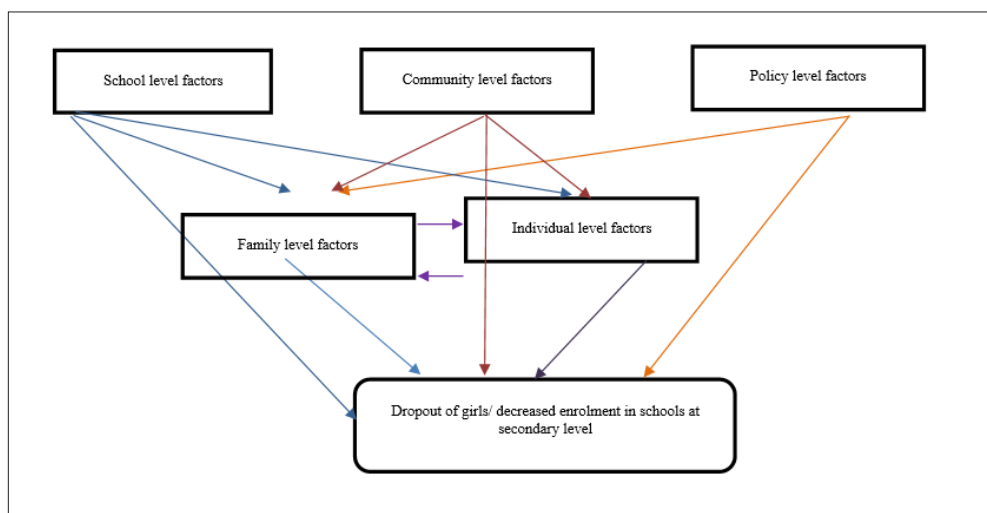
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for the Reasons for Girls' Dropout or Decreased Enrollment in Schools in India

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The conceptual framework for the study was adopted from Oduya SO, as shown in Figure 1, citing school dropout as a complex interplay of multiple factors at the individual, family, community, school, and policy levels alongside peer influences.[14] The model suggests a lack of physical facilities and good teachers, a faraway location of schools, and negative peer influence as some of the school-level factors responsible for dropouts, besides the harsh behaviour of teachers. Community-level factors, such as teenage pregnancy, early marriage, and lack of a positive attitude towards girls' education, and individual factors like drug abuse, low academic performance, individual stress, low self-esteem, and learning disability are equally accountable to reduced retention of girls in schools. Lack of policies, scholarships, or cash incentives that promote girl education, and support from the policymakers can be the policy-level factors. Lack of parental support, poverty, negative attitude towards girls' education and poor women's status or empowerment are included as family-level factors. These factors may be interlinked as one factor may affect the other, resulting in increased dropouts or decreased enrolment in schools.

Materials and Methods

Settings and Participants

This qualitative study took place across five states of India, namely Odisha, Maharashtra, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan. A total of 11 districts including, Bolangir and Nuapada from Odisha, Nagpur from Maharashtra, West Delhi from Delhi, Lucknow, Varanasi, Kaushambi, Banda, and Prayagraj from Uttar Pradesh, and Churu and Sri Ganganagar from Rajasthan, were included. These were selected because they were the intervention districts for a community-based programme with the aim of improving the retention of girls in schools.

The participants were teachers who were actively working or were retired from government or private schools. These teachers were a part of the two-day training on a module developed for teachers' training on gender-responsive constructivist pedagogy, and conducting sessions for adolescent girls, boys, their parents, and influential leaders in the communities for supporting girls' education. The participants were selected from the respective districts based on the criteria of their residence (close to the area of the intervention) and interest in volunteering for activities to educate girls. The retired teachers were selected particularly because of their experience of years of teaching that would help us in transforming change later in schools and communities, and their availability to do sessions in the intervention areas. There were 10-12 participants across each district who were selected for the training (convenient sampling). The participants who consented to participate in the training and to fill out the questionnaires were included irrespective of gender, caste, or religion. Purposive sampling was used for the selection of 122 teachers for the intervention. The study was conducted between February and March 2021.

Data Collection

The data were collected through a self-administered questionnaire with open-ended questions about teachers' perceptions. The questionnaire had seven questions, out of which six were open-ended and one was close-ended, besides questions on age, gender, and location. The open-ended questions included the following: create a mind map of the experiences and reasons regarding why girls in their areas drop out or don't go to schools, identify barriers and solutions to the barriers in girls completing education, explore activities or things a boy or a girl could do or not do, actions they would take as a girl or someone else to reconnect dropouts to schools, possibilities for parents to support girls to get complete school education along with their boys, and the role of a mother who understands the needs and aspirations of her daughter, in supporting girls' education.

The structured part included a 3-point Likert scale-based question of 9 statements that reflected participants' efforts/ actions to support girls' education in various ways. The questionnaire was based on the conceptual framework of the study. Every participant was given nearly 60-70 minutes to complete the survey. The questionnaire was in the local language (Hindi/ English).

Data Analysis

The answers to open-ended questions were read line-by-line, translated into English, and coded. We performed content analysis. After the responses were coded, they were compiled into a document and then sorted by codes to identify emerging themes. This analysis was performed using Microsoft Excel. All the responses were reread by the corresponding author to confirm the examples under the emerging themes within the proposed framework and to extract the responses to support the examples in the themes. Debriefings with other researchers were done to avoid researcher bias and obtain feedback on the codes and themes.

Ethical Approval

The ethical approval for interviewing participants and collecting data was obtained from the MAMTA Institutional Ethics Review Board.

Results

The median (interquartile range) age of the participants was 42 (32-53) years. There were 30 (24.6%) females and 92 (75.4%) males. Out of 122 teachers, 29 were retired and the remaining 93 were teaching secondary or senior secondary

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sections in schools as we purposively took teachers who were teaching late adolescents (> 15 years). We obtained four major themes from the data.

Perceived Reasons for Increased School Dropout of Girls

Most of the participants identified various reasons for girls' dropout, such as illiteracy of parents, poverty, unemployment of parents, and big family size. Also, far away locations of schools with limited or no means of transport, parents' fear for the safety of girls, indifferent teachers' attitudes, and parents' behaviour to support girls' education were endorsed as some of the barriers in girls' way to complete schooling. Parents expected girls to contribute to household chores instead of going to schools for education. Gender discrimination seemed to be another cause of girls' dropout. A few people highlighted that girls seemed disinterested in studies and repeatedly fail, besides a lack of support from parents. Even early marriage was highlighted as a reason for girls' dropout. Boys seemed and girls did not seem to get opportunities for education. It seemed that gender discrimination persisted, and people thought boys needed education and girls didn't.

Lack of women empowerment, domestic violence, dowry and harassment, lack of right to equality, and female foeticide were highlighted as some of the discriminatory practices against women in society. Besides these, societal beliefs and norms seemed to prevent girls from going to school. Lack of encouragement and positive attitude of teachers towards girls' education and self-confidence among girls, bad behaviour with girls in schools, and lack of facilities in schools act as barriers to girls' retention in schools. Especially during periods, girls find it difficult to go to school due to a lack of sanitary pads or toilets or clean toilets in schools. Parents believed that girls would be married one day and would stay with their husbands and in-laws, so they thought that there was no need to invest money in their education. Girls were also expected to take care of their younger siblings, so they could not go to school or drop out.

"Parents take a girl as a liability, they feel sad about their life, they are worried about dowry so as soon as a girl is born parents don't want to spend much on education, they spend on marriage to finish their responsibility." (A teacher)

"Families' poor situation, orthodox thinking, child marriage, household responsibilities, societal thinking, more importance to boys than girls, lack of resources in rural areas and negative environment at home are possible reasons for school dropout of girls." (A teacher)

"Parents marry off their daughters early, and then girls get occupied in household chores, and hence, leave schooling in-between." (A teacher)

Perceptions about Differences in Gender Identity and Roles between Boys and Girls

Boys' behaviour and roles have been identified as brave, hardworking, and responsible for bearing household expenses and earning money. Men have anger and can fight. Men could be doctors, politicians, leaders, or heads of families. However, females are supposed to manage houses, are considered simple and beautiful, and are the 'goddess of household wealth'. Females are mothers and feed milk to children. Females could be a pilot, doctor, nurse, teacher, or midwife. The participants perceived that a woman could become anything that she wanted.

Boys could drive a car and go anywhere anytime, play anywhere and whatever like wrestling or cricket, dance, sing and do other activities, such as farming. Being a girl, one could cook food, sing a melody, dance well, do all household work, give birth to a baby, and be very beautiful. One participant said that girls could play cricket, earn money, become actresses or teachers, and complete their studies. As a boy, one could enjoy and go out, but girls could not go out. A girl is perceived to be shy, spending money, and soft by nature. A boy couldn't cook, but a girl could.

A boy is perceived to have all the freedom and not feel scared, while a girl is believed to stay at home, wear a nice dress, cook breakfast well, and get up early. She cannot go out, shout, or do a job outside the home. A girl is perceived to respect her husband, move into their in-laws' house, and manage children. A few felt that boys could stay out late at night and could provide service to their parents by staying at home.

"As a boy, I can speak loud, go anywhere in the night, go abroad for studies, and do a job anywhere I want." (A participant).

However, some felt that even girls could do any job. They said that girls could understand others' feelings. As a girl, they could stitch, wear sari, and do a painting. Men are perceived to be merciless and powerful leaders. Girls couldn't stay out of their houses late at night and study too much otherwise, there may be problems in their marriage. Boys could wear what they wished whereas girls couldn't. Boys are expected not to cry while girls can, and girls are supposed to stay under restrictions. It was perceived that girls were not capable of hardship jobs, fighting, speaking loudly, or making decisions alone.

Boys could join the military to serve and secure the nation and become scientists or engineers. Men are perceived to have the power to send their children for higher education. Some believed that girls could join the police to serve the nation. Irrespective of gender, boys and girls could do social work; boys could be social workers and girls could educate girls in society or help women through a helpline. Boys

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could and girls couldn't go and stay alone, study what and where they wished, marry, or work where and when they wanted. Some participants believed that girls and boys are equal and could do the same jobs or professions or work like cooking or supporting parents. Girls are believed to impart education to their children often and respect everyone.

"If females are educated then, three generations after that will be educated; if you give equal rights to women, then you can bring a change in society and families." (A teacher).

Furthermore, participants highlighted boys could stand for the rights of their sisters, and as a girl, one could complete her education, stand against gender discrimination and marry only after completing her education. Girls could break the norms of society that prevent girls from staying out late at night, and receive higher education. Boys are perceived to help fathers in their work. A few added that as a boy, one should respect and give equality to girls. A girl could aspire to work late at night, ride a bike and enjoy her life as boys do. Participants recognised the role of boys in eliminating gender stereotyping in society. Boys could accompany their sisters to markets, schools, and colleges. On the contrary, girls could help their brothers in their studies.

"A girl has to face challenges, criticism, or barriers in doing anything, but they should never give up and continue trying to achieve goals in life." (A participant).

Perceived Role of Mothers in Shaping Girls' Future

Girls and boys are equal; girls could achieve success in life with education, and if provided opportunities, they could make families feel proud and shine like a star. Girls were believed to be the pride of parents and household. A mother could help her children shape their future, fulfil their dreams, teach them, and not allow them to do household chores. Mothers could be friends with daughters and could help them in their studies. They felt that the mother has the biggest role in ensuring the future of the girl child. Only a mother could fight with the whole family and society for the future of her daughter. A mother could fulfil every need of the children, teach her children many activities in a playful manner, and make them independent. Mothers' engagement is crucial in supporting girls' education as the mother is the first teacher and best friend of a girl child, who encourages them to study, makes them self-dependent, and inculcates good practices.

"Mother is the first teacher of a child from whom a child starts learning. From getting up from bed to doing anything in life, a mother remains a mentor for a child." (A participant)

Perceived Ways to Help Girls Negotiate with Their Parents or Societies for Continuing Education

Teachers perceived that girls could talk to parents about the benefits of education and convince them. Continuous persuasion by girls is important. Some perceived that the involvement of other family members should be tried. Teachers suggested taking the help of friends or brothers to convince parents to complete their education. Teachers perceived the need to arrange resources for girls for education, bring them forward, reduce gender discrimination, delay early marriage, encourage girls to do a job, make girls independent, and let girls fulfil their dreams by becoming what they want to after studying. Teachers perceived parents and school teachers should counsel children, support them in education, and understand them emotionally.

Furthermore, participants highlighted the responsibility of school teachers to counsel parents to support girls' education and campaign in communities to change the attitude and behaviour of people. The consequences of inadequate access to education can push children towards ill habits. The need for gender equality in giving equal access to education to girls was highlighted. Parents should help children develop education plans and access government policies or schemes. Teachers could connect girls who are facing a financial crisis, with scholarships or schemes. Educating girls can empower them and help eradicate many evils such as early marriage, the purdah system, etc., which helps in educating future generations. Separate toilet facilities in schools, scholarships, providing safety and security, good diet/ nutrition, and communication are important. Gender/ sex education in schools was highlighted by some teachers. Also, they highlighted the role of local governance committees and frontline workers in supporting girls' education.

"There is a negative attitude in villages for girl education as what would girls do after education, as they are supposed to run a household in in-laws' house. School teachers and brothers are quite useful in influencing fathers' decision to send daughters to schools." (A participant).

Table 1.Distribution of the Study Participants Across 3-point Likert Scale-based Statements Reflecting Their Actions to Support Girls' Education (N = 122)

Statements	Yes, I Do It n (%)	I Could Do Better n (%)	I Need A Lot of Effort For Improvement n (%)
I make efforts to create an inclusive environment in my classroom and in my school	78 (64.0)	22 (18.0)	22 (18.0)

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I promote girls and boys equally in each subject taught to them	94 (77.0)	15 (12.3)	13 (10.7)
I encourage girls to participate in outdoor activities equally as I do for boys	79 (64.8)	26 (21.3)	17 (13.9)
In my class, the activities are distributed according to the skills and abilities of the students and not on the basis of their sex	70 (57.4)	20 (16.4)	32 (26.2)
I hold meetings with the school management to make girl-friendly infrastructure	73 (59.8)	20 (16.4)	29 (23.8)
I have planned activities and have encouraged parents to support their girl child's education	75 (61.5)	24 (19.7)	23 (18.9)
I initiated a campaign in the community to increase the enrollment and readmission of the dropout girls	62 (50.8)	24 (19.7)	36 (29.5)
I have contacted governmental and non-governmental agencies for helping to increase girl child enrollment, and have worked with them for their readmission and retention	54 (44.3)	30 (24.6)	38 (31.1)
With my personal efforts, I have been able to motivate 10 girls in my work experience to complete their school education	72 (59.0)	17 (13.9)	33 (27.0)

Actions of Participants to Support Girls' Education, Gender Equality, and Reduce Dropout Rates

Among the participants, 64% made efforts to create an inclusive environment in their classroom (Table 1). Similarly, 61.5% of the participants had encouraged parents to support their daughters' education. However, 31.1% of the participants needed to put in a lot of effort to connect girls with governmental or non-governmental agencies to improve girls' admission and retention in schools.

Discussion

Congruent to other studies, we identified two major individual-level factors for school dropout, i.e. disinterest in studies and repeated failures.[15,16] At the family level, multiple factors such as parents' illiteracy, poverty, unemployment, fear of girls' safety, and negative attitude towards girls' education and big family size were stated by the participants in our study. These reasons have been cited in other studies too, based on national and regional-level data.[15,17,18] Family economic circumstances have a complex relationship with school dropouts, as absolute poverty (the inability to afford the direct costs of schooling) cannot account for dropout on its own with no fees in most of the government and government-aided schools. Absolute poverty may account for delayed entry into school and high repetition rates of girls/ boys. However, relative poverty, due to inequalities in society, inculcates the feeling of inferiority and the need to fit in with peers among students. This, in due course, may lead to stress and anxiety with decreased participation in school and eventual dropout.[17,19]

Big family size, educational status of parents, and girls' engagement in household chores may influence the decision regarding girls' dropout, but more importantly, family dynamics play a crucial role. Open communication between parents and daughters and shared aspirations in pursuing education can deter the process of dropout and poor performance in school. The improved family dynamics have the potential to dissuade the influence of gender norms and inequalities and foster girls' agency to pursue education and complete schooling.[18,20] Similar to other studies, our data showed numerous school-level factors responsible for dropouts such as faraway location and infrastructure limitations in schools, lack of separate toilets for girls and good quality education, non-supportive teachers' behaviour, and attitude towards girls' education.[15,17,18] Some studies endorsed a capability lens to consider how girls perceive these barriers and suggested ways to build a supportive environment and nurture girls' agency to overcome these structural barriers.[18]

Gender norms and discrimination are enrooted in a society that disempowers women's value and contribution economically and professionally. Boys are encouraged to work, earn money, take leadership roles and decisions for the family, and do what they wish. On the contrary, girls are considered family's honour, and their purity until marriage is the concern for the family. Hence, their mobility

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is restricted; they are married off early, not allowed to work outside the home, go out late at night, or study abroad. This is further fostered by non-gender-sensitive schools where men are shown as leaders in the textbooks, boys are preferred to play sports and participate in extracurricular activities, while girls are not.[21,22] Besides, men are shown as leaders, strong and smart, and occupying high positions in the textbooks, whereas women are portrayed as victims of abuse and violence, and are shown to be weak, which negatively impacts how girls are perceived in society.[23] Societal norms devalue girls' education making educated girls less preferred for marriage.[24]

The mothers who have no education or are less educated, struggle to promote the education of their children, they can be a source of inspiration and play a supportive role for their daughters.[25] Mothers can be a part of their daughters' successful journey of schooling by not engaging them in household chores, negotiating with other family members to let their daughters study in schools, supporting them during periods, and countering social norms that promote early marriage or gender discrimination.[26]

A lack of female teachers has been spotlighted as a barrier to girls' education. The data show that only 29% of teachers at the primary level and 22% at the university level were female.[23] The teacher's role is crucial in negotiating with parents for their daughter's education and deterring early marriage. They can mentor girls to raise their voices and build self-efficacy.[24] Some of the steps policymakers have taken include providing girls with incentives like scholarships, bicycles, books and stationery materials, uniforms, and mid-day meals in schools.[23] Education can make girls socially and financially empowered, improve their decision-making skills and increase their contribution to society and the nation.[24] Though two-thirds of the teachers tried to impart inclusive education, promote girls and boys equally, and encourage girls for outdoor activities, only half had actually initiated a campaign to increase enrollment or contacted any organisation to increase retention or readmission in our study. This highlighted the lack of proactiveness of teachers as well as the gap areas for not-for-profit organisations to persuade for action.

The World Bank provided 5-pillars of educating girls' strategy, including increasing enrolment of girls in schools using data, reforming school management committees to make school environment girl-friendly, embarking on child-centric creative learning and teaching techniques to improve the quality of education, creating girl leaders to improve communication and girls' participation, and forming girls' groups to convince parents and communities for supporting girls' education.[27] Village committees are endorsed with the responsibility to monitor schools and their services at regular intervals. Greater involvement and proactive steps

by the members of the local governance committee can help bring girls back to schools and convince them to pursue higher education.[28] The provision of basic facilities such as electricity, water, boundary walls, and toilets in schools, safety and security of girls, greater gender focus and social mobilisation, and inclusive education to promote greater enrollment of marginalised girls are suggestive measures for the policymakers to act upon.[29]

Recommendations

A comprehensive, multi-level intervention with students, teachers, parents, and communities is required to help girls complete secondary education.

Limitations

The data included perspectives of teachers and not parents or adolescents, which might showcase an incomplete picture; however, the teachers could be parents themselves. Hence, their perspective could be seen as a proxy for parents as well. Because of the pre-selected locations where the study took place and with a small number of participants with whom the study was conducted, the results may not be generalisable and applicable to the entire Indian population.

Conclusions

The study concluded that teachers perceived individual-level factors, such as disinterest in studies and repeated failures of girls; family-level factors, such as parents' illiteracy, poverty, unemployment, fear of girls' safety, and negative attitude, big family size, educational status of parents, and girls' engagement in household chores; school-level factors such as faraway location and infrastructure limitations in schools, lack of separate toilets for girls and good quality education, non-supportive teachers' behaviour, and attitude towards girls' education; and society-level factors, such as gender norms and discrimination, responsible for girls' dropouts at the secondary-level.

Author Contributions

Conceptualisation: SS and RC; Methodology: RC; Formal analysis: SS and PSKS; Writing - original draft preparation: SS; Writing - review and editing: RC and SM; Visualisation: SM; Supervision: PSKS and SM; and Project administration: SS. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest: None

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