Champions: The Realities of Realizing the Right to Education in India

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the findings of a mixed methods study that explores the individual, social, and infrastructure factors that influence educational participation of 403 "Champions" in Maharashtra, India. Champions are defined as second year female college students whose parents completed a primary school education or less. The results of the study, as framed by Kenneth McLeroy et al's social ecology model, suggest "Champions" owe their success primarily to exceptional levels of familial support, mentorship from teachers, and personal resilience in the face of considerable obstacles including inadequate facilities and rampant sexual harassment. These findings mount a critique of the efficacy of public educational measures targeted at improving gender equality in education.

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I.   BACKGROUND

For decades increasing per-capita years of educational attainment has been a universal goal of national governments, intergovernmental and civil society organizations worldwide. Successive human rights treaties and global efforts such as the Education for All movement and the Millennium Development Goals exemplify this commitment.[1] The focus on education over the last four decades has resulted in large gains: worldwide primary school enrollments have increased from 418 to 702 million pupils, secondary from 196 to 531 million, and tertiary level enrollments have grown from 33 to 164 million.[2] However, in many cases, this rapid expansion has come at the expense of quality and has generated social, gender, and ethnic inequalities in attainment.[3] Though a majority (albeit slight—56 percent) of the world's primary school children live in countries that have achieved gender parity at that level, the proportion drops to 29 percent at lower secondary and an even more dramatic 15 percent at the upper secondary level.[4] Gender based inequalities are particularly troubling as female education has been long considered an unparalleled mechanism for correcting historic gender inequality and enhancing economic growth.[5] Positive social outcomes are also associated with better and more prolonged female education, including gains in female empowerment, increased female earning potential,[6] and a reductions in their exposure to violence.[7] Enhanced female educational

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1.   Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, *adopted* 18 Dec. 1979, G.A. Res. 34/180, U.N. GAOR, 34th Sess., art. 10, U.N. Doc. A/34/46 (1980), 1249 U.N.T.S. 13 (*entered into force* 3 Sept. 1981); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *adopted* 16 Dec. 1966, G.A. Res. 2200 (XXI), U.N. GAOR, 21st Sess., arts. 3, 13, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 993 U.N.T.S. 3 (*entered into force* 3 Jan. 1976); Convention on the Rights of the Child, *adopted* 20 Nov. 1989, G.A. Res. 44/25, U.N. GAOR, 44th Sess., arts. 28, 29, U.N. Doc. A/44/49 (1989), 1577 U.N.T.S. 3 (*entered into force* 2 Sept. 1990). See a more recent non-binding international commitment, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Millennium Development Goals (MDG) Goal 3, *availalble at* http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/goals/.
2.   UNESCO, World Atlas of Gender Equality in Education 9 (2012), *available at* http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/pdf/Atlas-education-gender-equality1.pdf .
3.   World Bank, Expanding Opportunities and Building Competencies for Young People: A New Agenda for Secondary Education (2005), *available at* http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/278200-1099079877269/547664-1099079967208/Expanding_Opportunities_Secondary.pdf
4.   UNESCO 2012, *supra* note 2, at 24.
5.   Stephan Klasen, *Does Gender Inequality Reduce Growth and Development? Evidence from Cross-Country Regressions*, Policy Research Report on Gender and Development Working Paper 7, World Bank, Wash., DC (1999), *available at* http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.196.8824&rep=rep1&type=pdf.
6.   T. Paul Schultz, *Returns to Women's Education, in* Women's Education in Developing Countries: Barriers, Benefits, and Policy (Elizabeth M. King, M. Anne Hall eds., 1993)
7.   Agarwal, Bina, & Pradeep Panda. Toward Freedom From Domestic Violence: The Neglected Obvious, 8 J. Hum. Dev. 359 (2007).

engagement is associated with long term inter-generational health benefits such as lower infant mortality rates, lower rates of HIV/AIDS infection, and lower fertility rates.[8]

India's education system exemplifies this gender struggle. Recognizing that education is a right essential to the nation's continued economic and social development, the government has focused on raising the average per capita years of education as a critical plank of its youth policy. While the number of girls and women enrolled in schools and colleges in India has steadily increased over the years, the education system is plagued by dismal retention figures, poor learning outcomes, and inequitable access across gender, socioeconomic, and ethnic divides.[9] Eight out of ten girls attend at the primary school level, yet the net female attendance rate at the tertiary level is only 7 percent, falling to 5 percent for girls from rural areas. By contrast, 13 percent of urban males attend college.[10] A recent study by Manisha Chakrabarty and Sumon Bhaumik presented an even starker divide. According to their analysis, an urban male has a 13.06 percent probability of making the transition to tertiary education, while the corresponding probability for a rural male is 5.04 percent. The situation is even worse for women, where the corresponding transition probabilities are 5.88 percent and less than 1 percent, respectively.[11] Rural location is often a proxy for lower socioeconomic status[12] and lower levels of parental literacy.[13]

Much research has focused on barriers to educational attainment in India such as overburdened infrastructure[14] and absentee teachers,[15] which results

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8. Jean Dreze & Mamta Murthi, *Fertility, Education, and Development: Evidence from India*, 27 Pop. & Dev. Rev. 33 (2001) (lower infant mortality rates, lower rates of HIV/AIDS infection and lower fertility rates).

9. Planning Commission, Government of India, (PCGOI) Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012–2017) Social Sectors 68 (2013), *available at* http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/12th/pdf/12fyp_vol3.pdf.

10. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, (MSPIGOI), Education in India 2007–08: Participation and Expenditure, A165, *available at* http://www.educationforal-linindia.com/participation_and_expenditure_nsso_education.pdf.

11. Manisha Chakrabarty & Sumon Kumar Bhaumik, *Whither Human Capital? The Woeful Tale of Transition to Tertiary Education in India*, 19 Applied Econ. Letters 835, 837 (2012).

12. In 2012 average rural monthly per capita expenditure was Rs.1281.45 ($25),as opposed to Rs.2401.68 ($46) in urban India (68th NSS 2012). PCGOI, Press Note on Poverty Estimates: 2011–12, at 7 (2013); *available at* http://planningcommission.nic.in/news/pre_pov2307.pdf. *See also* PCGOI, *Press Note on Poverty Estimates, 2009–10* (2013); *available at* http://planningcommission.nic.in/news/press_pov1903.pdf.

13. Rural parental education levels are much lower, as are adult male and female literacy rates; in rural areas male and female literacy rates lie at 77 and 58 percent respectively compared to 89 and 79 percent for urban dwellers. *See* GOI, Ministry of Home Affairs, Census 2011, *available at* http://censusindia.gov.in/2011census/censusinfodashboard/stock/downloads/Profiles_6/PDF/IND_6.pdf.

14. World Bank, Secondary Education in India: Universalizing Opportunity (2009), *available at* http://datatopics.worldbank.org/hnp/files/edstats/INDstu09b.pdf.

15. Michael Kremer, Nazmul Chaudhury, F. Halsey Rogers, Karthik Muralidharan, & Jeffrey Hammer, *Teacher Absence in India: A Snapshot.* 3 J. Eur. Econ. Ass'n. 658 (2005).

in poor educational outcomes.[16] For girls, particularly restrictive discriminatory gender norms such as disproportionate domestic burden,[17] unequal family resource allocation,[18] parents' failure to appreciate the benefit of girls' education, and early marriage[19] are significant compounding factors.

Rather than further investigate the nature of these barriers, this article highlights the triggers of success for young women attending the second year of government college, despite the fact that both of the parents of these women have very limited (if any) education. The findings presented are based on the results of a positive deviance study conducted in Maharashtra. The term "positive deviance" applies to the study of individuals who demonstrate above-average outcomes in impoverished environments.[20] The study shows that administrative procedures for scholarships remain cumbersome and intractable. Given those challenges, only those who have strong personal assets realize their educational rights and potential. Unfortunately, familial encouragement is a scarce commodity and an unreliable strategy for ensuring equitable access to education for marginalized girls from poor and uneducated backgrounds in staunchly patriarchal communities. We propose that more robust targeting of financial, administrative and educational support, and greater engagement with relevant families are essential to ensure that a broader cohort of disadvantaged Indian girls are afforded educational opportunity.

II.   RESEARCH SETTING

Maharashtra, the state where this research was conducted, is one of the most economically developed states in India, contributing about 14.95 percent of the country's GDP, more than any other state. Despite growth in its overall economy, there are vast inequalities in the distribution of wealth in the state. In 2011 through 2012, 17 percent of residents lived below the poverty line (BPL), marginally lower that the national average of 22 percent.[21] The state

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16.   Pratham, Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2014 (2015), *available at* http://img. asercentre.org/docs/Publications/ASER%20Reports/ASER%202014/fullaser2014mainreport_1.pdf.
17.   Orla Kelly & Jacqueline Bhabha, *Beyond the Education Silo? Tackling Adolescent Secondary Education in Rural India*, 35 Brit. J. Sociol'gy Ed. 731 (2014).
18.   Global Poverty Research Group, Geeta Gandhi Kingdon, The Progress of School Education in India (2007), *available at* http://economics.ouls.ox.ac.uk/12991/1/gprg-wps-071.pdf.
19.   In India the child marriage rate stands at 45 percent see Ann M. Moore, Susheela Singh, Usha Ram, Lisa Remez & Suzette Audam, Guttmacher Inst. Adolescent Marriage and Childbearing in India: Current Situation and Recent Trends 10 (2009), *available at* http://www.guttmacher. org/pubs/2009/06/04/AdolescentMarriageIndia.pdf.
20.   Marian Zeitlin, *Nutritional Resilience in a Hostile Environment: Positive Deviance in Child Nutrition*, 49 Nutrition Rev. 259 (1991)
21.   PCGOI, Press Note on Poverty Estimates: 2011–12 at 6, *supra* 12.

Table 1. *Age Specific Attendance Ratio by Broad Age Group in Any Type of Education*

Age Group	6–10		11–13		14–17		18–24	
	Maharashtra	All-India	Maharashtra	All-India	Maharashtra	All-India	Maharashtra	All-India
Rural Male	93 %	89 %	88 %	88 %	72 %	65 %	16 %	16 %
*Rural Female	**93 %**	**86 %**	**92 %**	**82 %**	**64 %**	**55 %**	**8 %**	**9 %**
Urban Male	95 %	91 %	94 %	90 %	73 %	71 %	20 %	20 %
Urban Female	94 %	90 %	92 %	88 %	69 %	70 %	22 %	19 %

Source: NSS Report No 532: Education in India: Participation and Expenditure, 2007–08
*As noted earlier rural disadvantage is attributable not only to infrastructural shortcomings but also a range of other barriers such as low levels of parental literacy, conservative gender norms, and poverty.

also compares marginally better than most across many social indicators including educational outcomes. The adult female literacy rate is 75 percent, as opposed to 65 percent at the national level.[22] Girls' educational attainment rates are also slightly higher than the country wide average, as Table 1 below illustrates.

These figures evidence dramatically inequitable access. Nevertheless they represent a vast improvement in educational participation over the course of the six decades since independence, particularly at the primary level. This increase in elementary enrollments has been linked to Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the Government of India's massive centrally sponsored scheme for elementary education.[23] The investment has resulted in a large intergenerational shift from illiteracy to primary school attendance, even amongst many of the most marginalized communities. The program involved major investment in infrastructure, teaching recruitment, and training. It included the introduction of residential schools in isolated or "educationally backward"[24] areas and the provision of free meals, uniforms, and other supplies. In 2009, the government launched its scheme for universalizing secondary education known as Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA).[25] This scheme has the ambitious goal of achieving universal secondary school enrollment by 2017 and universal retention by 2020. RMSA adopts a similar approach to SSA and provides for infrastructural development, teacher training, and the expansion of girls' residential facilities. Implementation to date has been sluggish due in some part to administrative delays at the state level. Investment in tertiary education is growing, though overall participation rates are still low compared to countries to which India is often compared economically.[26] The following section outlines the methodology employed in this study to unpack the experiences of young women who successfully navigated what many continue to find an impenetrable education system.

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study utilizes the model developed by Kenneth McLeroy, et al. to catalog and analyze the diverse influencers of educational attainment among

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22. GOI, Ministry of Home Affairs, State of Literacy Census 2011,. at 101, 111, *available at* http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data_files/india/Final_PPT_2011_chapter6.pdf.
23. In India primary education runs from Grade I–V for lower primary school, VI–VII for upper primary. Grade IX–X are classified as secondary school and Grade XI–XII senior secondary school.
24. Educationally Backward Blocks are defined as blocks where adult female rural literacy is below the national average
25. See Ministry of Human Resource Development GOI, *available at* http://www.rmsaindia.org/ (universalization of secondary education).
26. World Bank, *supra* note 14.

young women in Maharashtra.[27] The model postulates that understanding interpersonal, organizational, community, and policy-related factors that affect behavior can enable better social interventions. Since its inception, applications of this, so called "social ecological" model have expanded from public health and sociology to public policy,[28] educational policy,[29] and even engineering.[30] We hypothesize that educational participation is shaped by a multiplicity of interrelated factors: girls' own abilities, preferences, and choices as well as those of their parents, siblings, and extended family; the nature of their schools; the composition and perspective of their communities; and a range of macro level factors related to the state and country in which they reside (see Figure 1).
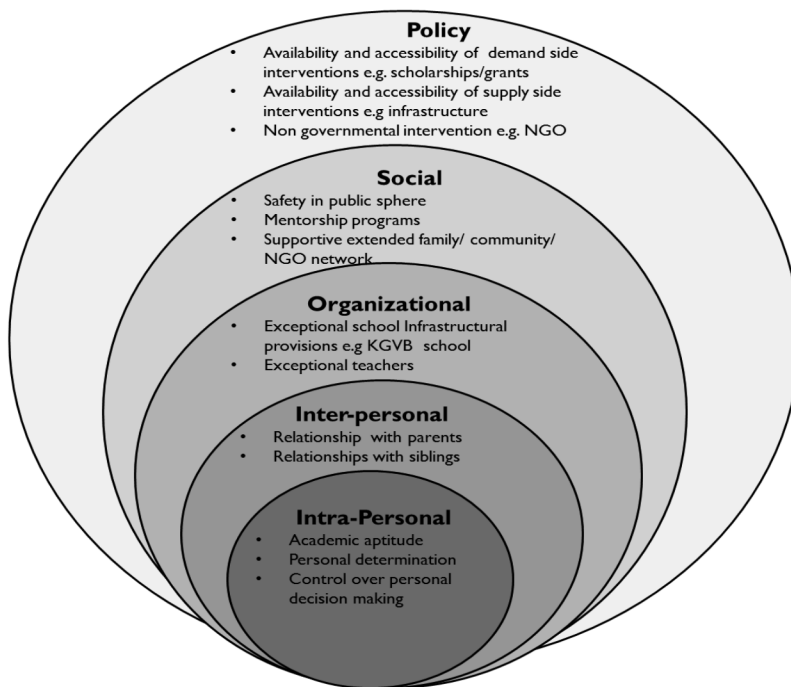
Policy
- Availability and accessibility of demand side interventions e.g. scholarships/grants
- Availability and accessibility of supply side interventions e.g infrastructure
- Non governmental intervention e.g. NGO

Social
- Safety in public sphere
- Mentorship programs
- Supportive extended family/ community/ NGO network

Organizational
- Exceptional school Infrastructural provisions e.g KGVB school
- Exceptional teachers

Inter-personal
- Relationship with parents
- Relationships with siblings

Intra-Personal
- Academic aptitude
- Personal determination
- Control over personal decision making

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework adapted from McLeroy et al. (1988)

27. Kenneth R. McLeroy , Daniel Bibeau, Allan Steckler, & Karen Glanz, *An Ecological Perspective on Health Promotion Programs*, 15 Health Ed. Q. 351 (1988).
28. Marcie C. Goeke-Morey, Laura K. Taylor, Ed Cairns, Christine E. Merrilees, Peter Shirlow, & E. Mark Cummings, *Adolescents' Educational Outcomes in a Social Ecology of Parenting, Family, and Community Risks in Northern Ireland*, 34 School Psych. Int'l 243 (2012).
29. Dorothy L. Espelage, Mrinalini A. Rao & Lisa De La Rue, *Current Research on School-Based Bullying: A Social-Ecological Perspective*, 22 J. Soc. Distress & Homeless 7 (2013).
30. Roy, Eric D., Jay F. Martin, Elena G. Irwin, Joseph D. Conroy, & David A. Culver, *Living Within Dynamic Social-Ecological Freshwater Systems: System Parameters and the Role of Ecological Engineering*, 37 Ecological Engineering 1661 (2011).

IV. METHODOLOGY

Participants were drawn from twenty government colleges across ten districts in Maharashtra. Districts were selected on the basis of their rankings in terms of female literacy rates and women's labor force participation: the top and bottom ranking districts in each of the five administrative zones were selected. Two government colleges[31] within the ten identified districts were selected conveniently on the basis of their affiliation with the University of Pune, the Indian research partner in this study, and the presence of a coordinator within the college willing to help facilitate the research.

In each college all second year students were asked to complete a short eligibility questionnaire. Participants' eligibility was based on parental educational attainment. Preference was given to those whose parents had never attended school, and then to those who had a parent with primary level education not exceeding enrollment in lower secondary school. Results from this initial screening questionnaire were tabulated and a list of eligible students was compiled, namely those whose parents had completed no more than a primary school education. Eligible students were then immediately invited to complete a longer questionnaire. The survey instrument included established measures designed to probe the factors affecting educational participation at each level of the student's social ecology.

For the qualitative component of the research, forty participants (two from each college) were invited to participate in a "writing lives" workshop at the Women's Studies Centre at the University of Pune. In the end, thirty-two research participants were able to travel and take part. The format of the workshop allowed participants to prepare visual and written representations of their life journeys utilizing games, group discussions, poster making, and letter and diary writing. The qualitative texts analyzed in this report are narratives that the participants wrote about their "journey to college." This qualitative component amplifies the quantitative data and provides a deeper contextual understanding of the key success factors for the "Champions." NVivo 9 software was used to analyze the English transcripts of the writing lives narratives. A wide-range of data themes was examined through an open-coding framework, followed by a categorization of themes under the five domains of the social ecology model.

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31. Eighteen of the twenty colleges were general stream offering a combination of Liberal Arts, Science, and Commerce. Enrollment in government colleges is merit based and fees are nominal. We chose government colleges due to the wide variety of quality in private institutions. Many are expensive and elite while others are low cost non-accredited institutions.

V. FINDINGS

Following McLeroy et al.'s version of the social ecology model, we present the affecting participants' educational progression across the following five interconnected domains: intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, social, and policy.

A. Intrapersonal Factors

According to McLeroy et al, intrapersonal factors include individual traits such as knowledge, attitudes, behavior, self-concept, and skills. For the purposes of this research, they include established personal demographic characteristics such as age, marital status, academic aptitude, and self-concepts.

The average age of the research participants was 19.4 years with a range of 18 to 25 years. Among the 403 participants that met the parental education eligibility criterion, 96 percent were single, 3 percent were engaged and only 1 percent were married. This is noteworthy as the average marriage age for women in this state is 19.3 years, with 18 percent getting married before the age of eighteen.[32] This finding highlights the direct correlated relationship between education and delayed marriage in patriarchal societies.[33]

As Figure 2 below illustrates, participants reported high levels of control over personal decision making in relation to aspects of their lives known to negatively impact educational progression, namely engagement in household work, work outside the home, and early marriage. Forty-four percent reported a high to very high degree of control over the extent to which they engaged in household work. Seventy-three percent reported a high to very high degree of control over the extent to which they engaged in work outside the home, and 34 percent reported a high to very high degree of control over marriage arrangements. A supportive home environment where young women's educational aspirations are facilitated through the loosening of gendered expectations with regard to marriage and household chores is a key differentiator between these positive deviants and their peers. In an

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32. International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and Population Council, *How Early Marriage Compromises Girls' Lives, Maharashtra, Youth in India: Situation and Needs 2006–2007*, Policy Brief No. 6, Mumbai: IIPS (2008), *available at* http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/ForcedMarriage/NGO/PopulationCouncil7.pdf.

33. Less than one percent of participants reported having some form of disability. The World Health Organization estimates that amongst the general population, average rates of disability are as high as 15 percent. This very low rate of education participation amongst this marginalized group provides further evidence that young people with disabilities are largely excluded from main stream education in the developing world. WHO Disability and health Fact sheet No.352 (2014), *available at* http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs352/en/.

investigation into the barriers to educational progression in rural Gujarat, Orla Kelly and Jacqueline Bhabha found that power asymmetries in the household that led adolescent girls to bear the brunt of domestic responsibilities were a significant factor inhibiting educational participation.[34]
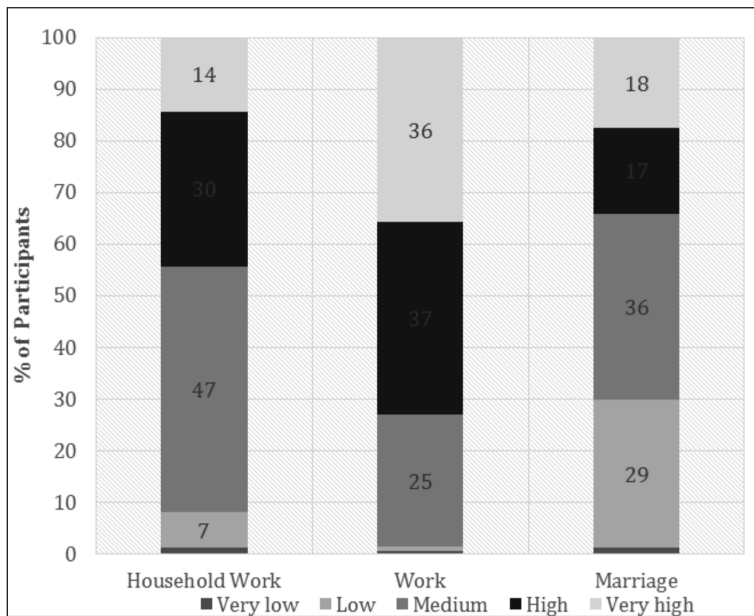

Figure 2. Self-Reported Degree of Decision Making Power (n=391)

This engagement in decision-making also affected choices influencing educational progression. The participation in decision-making is particularly noteworthy as many studies on women from similar personal, geographic, and socioeconomic backgrounds report a lack of input in decisions relating to education.[35]

Another striking intra-personal characteristic was participants' ambitious professional aspirations. Ninety-two percent stated that they intended to work outside the home after college, a clear divergence from the broader social environment. In Maharashtra only 31 percent of women are formally employed outside the home. Relatedly, 73 percent of participants reported that they saved for and bought their college application form themselves

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34. Kelly & Bhabha, *supra* note 17.
35. Shveta Kalyanwala, Population Council, Influencing Girls' Lives: Acceptability and Effectiveness of a Livelihoods Skill Building Intervention in Gujarat 10 (2006), *available at* http://www.sewaresearch.org/Thanks_research.asp?id=24.

through part time work such as tutoring. The importance of increasing personal financial autonomy emerged clearly from the qualitative materials gathered in the writing lives workshop.

> We have some land and since my mother has only daughters they feel that this land will become theirs after marriage and so also many of our relatives trouble us with marriage proposals. But I do not wish to get married right away. I wanted to have a career of my own. If I cannot make a career then I want to do my M.A at least. That is why I explain to my mother to not pay too much attention to others and I am sure that she will understand.—Adi, Age 20

The qualitative data also showed that while families were supportive, participants often stood their ground with determination in the interests of advancing their education. What is notable about the following extract is the extent to which the speaker felt empowered to challenge her father's wishes:

> The Arts and Commerce College was around 15 kms away while the Science College was almost 27 kms away. When I brought up this subject to my parents they were totally against me going to the science College. They felt that the science stream would mean a lot of expenditure and could be affordable only to the rich. But I was just not interested in doing Arts or Commerce. So I argued a lot with my family and finally managed to convince my father.—Lakshmi, Age 19

The academic aptitude of Champions, their personal ambition, and their ability to push familial boundaries to further their continued educational participation emerged as a ubiquitous trend in both the qualitative and quantitative data.

Participants also commonly reported excelling academically, a source of pride for both themselves and for their families, and this achievement may have given them the confidence to advocate for their continued education. This academic excellence also acted as a kind of social buffer against gender and social class discrimination inside the classroom and beyond. For example, Heena (21) noted that scoring higher than the rest of her cousins (even the males) was a point of pride for her family which gave her some bargaining power when discussions about finding her a marriage match arose. Others, such as Smita, noted that school exam results protected her from caste related bullying:

> Since I was intelligent we formed a group of all intelligent children. That's why nobody spoke ill about me in my class—Smita, Age 19

B. Interpersonal Factors

McLeroy et al. define interpersonal factors as formal and informal social networks and social support systems, including the family, friendship and

work networks. Because family remains the primary unit of socialization for many adolescent girls in India, interpersonal factors relate mostly to relationships with parents and siblings, with friends featuring to a lesser extent. Parental support emerged as a prominent trigger of success in both the quantitative and qualitative components of the research. As illustrated in Figure 3 below, three out of four participants reported that their parents were extremely supportive of their education throughout their lives.
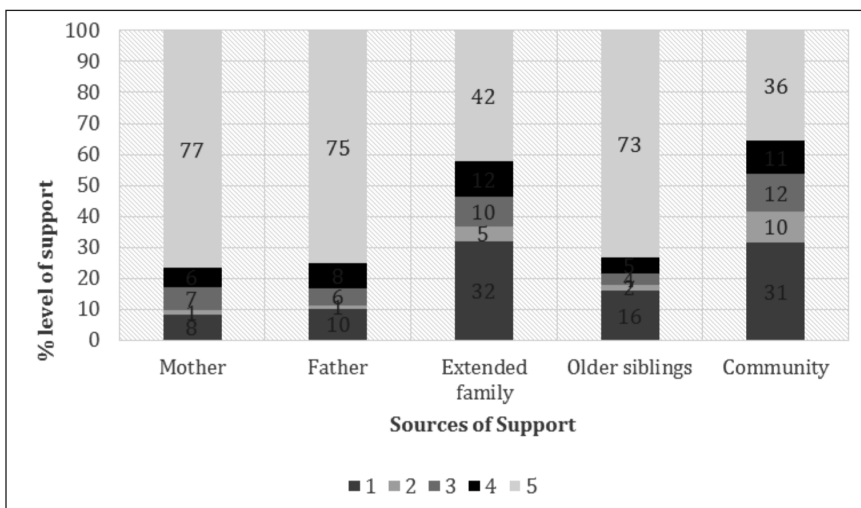

Figure 3. Self-Report Support for Education (n=401) where 1 is not supportive at all and 5 is very supportive.

Seventy-nine percent of participants reported being encouraged by their families to continue their education despite poor performance on a particular test. Further, 59 percent reported that their parents were the most positive influence on their education followed by teachers at 27 percent and siblings at 7 percent. This theme of categorical support also emerged from the qualitative data. Anitha described how her mother provided support in response to taunting in the public sphere—on the bus to college. This "Champion" was teased for sitting beside one of her brother's friends on the bus to college:

> I told my mother about [this teasing on] the bus and she only told me, "Aga, when the elephant starts walking, dogs start barking. The elephant does not go back just because the dog barks. . . . " These words of my mother relieved me a lot. I felt reassured that there is someone at least who trusts me completely and understands me well.—Anitha, Age 20

Other participant narratives included accounts of paternal support for female independence.

> My mother is willing to bear any amount of pains/difficulties for my education. My father too inspires me a lot. He tells me to fill this form or the other so that I will get a job. He feels that if I can stand up on my own feet that will reduce his worries. He has never objected to my education and he has never put any restrictions on my mother.—Priha, Age 19

Siblings complemented, or in some cases compensated, for shortcomings in parental support. For some, sibling support came in the form of help with homework, a critical input given the low levels of parental educational attainment. Indeed, 48 percent of participants reported receiving help with homework from their siblings while only 16 percent reported getting help from their fathers. Participants also noted that their friends in school provided moral, academic, and sometimes even financial support. Some participants noted that without the company of other girls it would not have been possible for them to venture into the public sphere:

> When I was in the twelfth, another girl from my village also took admission into the same College and so now I had company while travelling. That's why I was allowed to travel to and from College without any problems. –Prathibha, Age 21

While 64 percent of participants reported that pursuing education never caused tension within the home, extended family and broader community were found to be less accepting. One in three reported that extended family was "very unsupportive" (See Figure 3). In the qualitative data, grandparents in particular had concerns about how girls' continued education would affect their marriage prospects. As Vimala noted, many of the older generation saw the investment in girls' education as a waste of resources:

> I left our town to go play kabaddi twice at the state level. My brother was very supportive of me but my grandmother did not like this. She would even discriminate between us when it came to eatables. She was of the opinion my sisters and I were a "headache" for my father.—Vimala, Age 18

Support from the immediate family insulated the Champions as they challenged prevailing gender norms. In fact, in the survey three out of four participants reported that their families were supportive in the face of criticism from the wider community. Sometimes parents even defended their girls' right to education at the cost of their own physical safety:

> My mother's dream of getting educated herself was never fulfilled which is why she felt that we should study a lot, become successful, stand up on our own feet and lead respectful lives. She went against everybody in the house and admitted my elder sister into school. At that time my uncle even beat her but she did not step back. She was scared that if her first daughter did not study, the others would also not be able to study. "Keep me hungry for 4 days but let my daughters go to school," she would tell everybody at home.—Swapna, Age 19

Clearly, steadfast support from parents and siblings is a key trigger of educational success, particularly in the context of a broader discriminatory social environment.

C. Organizational Factors

According to McLeroy et al., institutional factors are social institutions with organizational characteristics and formal (and informal) rules and regulations for operation. Similar to the approach taken by those focusing on the social ecology of adolescent health,[36] in this study we defined institutional factors as the Champions' experience of school.

Participants were heavily reliant on the public school system with only a few attending private institutions, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. *Type of School Attended by Participants by Level (n=403)*

	Government in %	Government Aided in %	Private %
Lower Primary	78	16	6
Upper Primary	68	24	8
Lower Secondary	56	34	10
Upper Secondary	45	44	11

The most common reason cited for moving from one type of school (usually a government school) to another was that the first school did not offer a higher level of instructions. The dearth of secondary school facilities often resulted in participants having to travel substantial distances to attend school. At the lower primary level, 92 percent of participants could travel to school within thirty minutes. This percentage fell to 60 percent by the time participants reached the upper secondary level.

The increase in commute time seriously impacted the ability of some participants to focus on their studies. In her essay on challenges to educational participation, Renu described her difficulties in navigating these logistics:

 My second semester I started traveling from my village. I would leave home at 5.30 a.m. and come back only at 5.30 p.m. Because our school timings were 9-2, to catch the bus I had to walk about 4kms. This bus was 7.30 a.m. and if I missed that there was not another until 10.15 a.m. So I had to catch the 7.30 a.m. bus if I did not want to miss my lectures. So I had to run through the

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36.   Robert William Blum, Clea Mcneely, & James Nonnemaker, *Vulnerability, Risk, And Protection*, 31 J. ADOLESCENT HEALTH 28 (2002).

Table 3. Percent of Participants who Reported Having the Following School Infrastructural Elements (n=403)

Facility/ Level	Science Lab	Tables	Drinking Water	Play-ground	Food Mess	Boundary Wall	Black-board	Library	Computer	Computer Used
Lower Primary	18%	25%	74%	82%	11%	57%	91%	12%	10%	4%
Upper Primary	55%	73%	87%	93%	20%	71%	92%	43%	47%	30%
Lower Secondary	88%	98%	92%	96%	22%	74%	93%	64%	75%	55%
Upper Secondary	83%	98%	97%	96%	42%	87%	92.5%	88%	79%	41%

fields with all that weight of my books on my back each day to and fro from the bus stop to my home. The return bus was at 1.15 p.m. and then not until 4pm.—Renu, Age 20

Many participants reported improved infrastructural provisions in the upper levels of schooling, confirming the impact of increased government educational investment over the past decade. These improvements seem to have been sorely needed, as many of the participants reported a lack of basic school equipment, particularly at lower primary levels. As Table 3 above illustrates, just 25 percent of respondents reported having tables in their lower primary schools. The percentage of participants in classes where a computer was used increased significantly over the time span of their secondary education. Overall, however, this was true for less than half of the Champions—only 41 percent. The digital divide in a country that houses some of the leading technological institutes in the world remains stark.

The infrastructure improvements noted by the participants were not a result of a move by Champions from public to private school. In fact, we found no significant differences in infrastructural conditions between the low cost private (including private aided) and public schools.

The improvements noted included an upgrade in female toilets. As figure 4 shows, 45 percent of participants reported that there was either no toilet or that it was broken or unusable at the primary level, but by upper secondary this had fallen to 8 percent. Clearly, increased government investment in educational infrastructure generally and a focus on the importance of female toilets for post puberty girls has trickled down to local school facilities over the last decade.
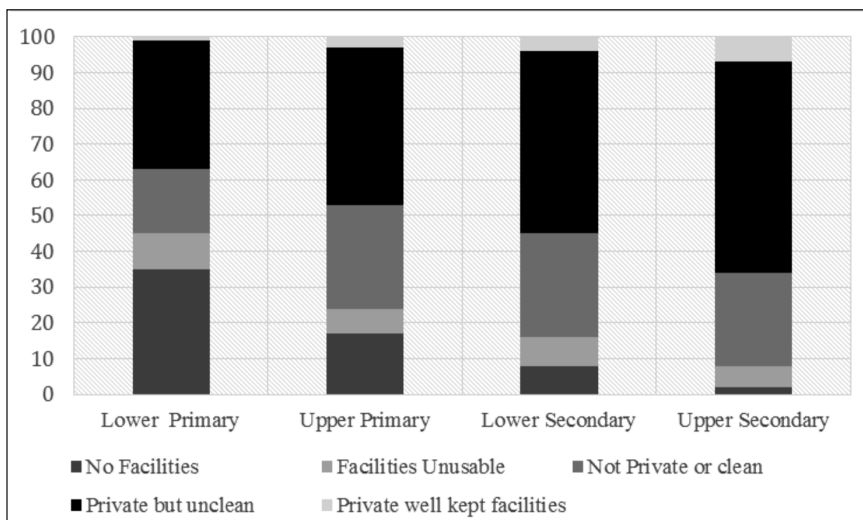

Figure 4. Conditions of Female Toilets by Level (n=398)

For many participants, teachers emerged as a critical trigger for success within the school setting. Teachers provided mentorship and encouragement that facilitated the continued educational participation of significant numbers of Champions. Participants were asked about several aspects of teachers' conduct, including the extent to which they assigned and checked homework, encouraged participation in class, were approachable, and addressed issues of class violence and discrimination on the basis of caste or ethnicity. A teacher "score" was created based on the answers to these questions. The maximum score was twenty-five. Overall teacher scores improved as students progressed beyond primary school and peaked at the lower secondary level, as Figure 5 shows.
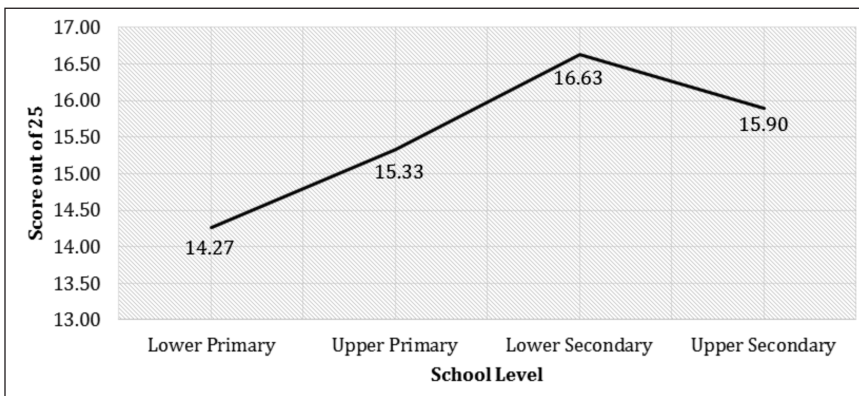

Figure 5. Average Teacher Scores by Level (n=398)

No significant differences were found in the overall score between ratings of teachers across the different regions within the state where the study was conducted or between different types of schools. Teacher support also emerged as a key theme in the participants' essays on the individuals and institutions that facilitated their educational success. For some participants, teacher intervention early on was critical. Anitha recounts the transformational impact a teacher had on her life—pushing her to not drop out of school but to excel in her studies:

> That teacher, her name was Mrs Shah treated me with a lot of compassion. If any day I could not go to school she came to my home to check on me. She turned a girl like me who could not read simple A, B C into a monitor within a span of a year. I really developed a liking towards education particularly maths. This teacher even used to cover my expenses because she knew our family situation and thought that I had potential.—Anitha, Age 19

Teachers were also the primary source of information about colleges and the application process (38 percent). The other primary sources included friends (25 percent), followed by senior students (21 percent), family members (12 percent), and media (4 percent).

Despite this positive balance sheet, not all experiences with teachers were positive. High levels of teacher violence were reported at the primary level, with 65 percent describing regular or occasional beatings by teachers. In lower secondary school the incidence of reported teacher violence dropped to 46 percent, and it decreased still further to 6 percent at the higher secondary level. Violence from teachers was not confined to corporal punishment. Ten percent of participants reported sexual abuse or harassment from teachers. Negative experiences with some of the teachers also emerged in the qualitative data.

> When we went to the eighth standard our math teacher changed. At first we liked that Sir a lot but later he started showing his true colors. He was very strict. He would show us how to solve all the problems initially and then the next day he would write the sums on the blackboard and ask us to solve them. If anybody could not solve the problem he would take a stick and beat the person.—Prathiba, Age 21

As Swapna's story below shows sometimes the abuse came in the form of psychological taunts:

> I was quite often insulted by my teachers. I could not retaliate since they were our teachers. Sir would always talk to us in anger. He'd tell us, "What will you do with all your study? Tell me and I will find a suitable match and will get you married." Whenever Sir met us he would say you both are dumb and you will fail the exams. But we proved him wrong, we both passed tenth standard.—Swapna, Age 19

The reduction in the amount that the girls experienced violence as they progressed through the education system is an encouraging trend. Our data do not show whether decreasing violence is the result of decreased tolerance for violence within the instructional system across the board or is merely a reflection of the fact that incidences of corporal punishment decrease as students transition from childhood to adolescence. A 2008 report from Plan India suggests that violence is still endemic, but recent data on the topic is scant.[37]

This inventory of institutional factors suggests that the Champions we studied did not particularly benefit from infrastructural inputs such as residential schools for marginalized girls. Rather, many successfully navigated the numerous institutional shortcomings—from long commutes to school

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37. Plan India. Learn Without Fear The Campaign to End Violence in School Challenges in India (2008)

violence—that thwarted the progress of the majority of their peers, by le-
veraging positive support along the way.

D. Community/Social Factors

McLeroy et al. define community and social factors as relationships among
organizations, institutions, and informal networks within defined boundar-
ies. To understand influencers of educational progression at this level, the
questionnaire probed participants' perceptions of the role of women in their
community and in society more generally, as well as their interactions with
their broader social environment.

 Again, the research design depended on a significant intergenerational
achievement gap between the "Champions" and their parents. Only students
with parents who had less than a lower secondary school education were
selected into the study. As a result, the data highlighted the particularly dra-
matic educational gulf separating daughters from their mothers. Whereas 12
percent of participants' fathers had never attended school at all, this was true
of 32 percent of mothers. Conversely only 14 percent of mothers had any
lower secondary education, compared to 33 percent of fathers. The levels
of educational attainment of the Champions represent a very promising sign
of inter-generational upward mobility.

 As one might expect, participants' aspirations diverged significantly
from those of their families and peers. Ninety-two percent of the Champions
planned to work outside the home after graduating (and 87 percent after
marriage), whereas 59 percent of their mothers were homemakers. Further, 46
percent of the participants had friends who had dropped out of education in
the previous year because of family pressures (including marriage). The types
of careers that participants envisaged for themselves also differed sharply
from the careers of their parents. Whereas 67 percent of the participants
expected to pursue government jobs after graduation (16 percent of whom
expected to be teachers), the majority of working mothers were engaged in
low skill occupations, including agriculture (46 percent) and domestic ser-
vice (26 percent). Despite the gap in educational outcomes and aspirations,
nine out of ten participants cited their parents as their prime role models.

 A refusal to accept limiting gender norms (including expectations re-
garding home based work and marriage) might have contributed to some of
the participants' frequent exposure to negative public sphere experiences.
As illustrated in Figure 6, a significant minority of students experienced
harassment on the way to school, particularly as the time spent traveling to
and from school increased. By the upper secondary level, more than one in
three participants reported regularly experiencing harassment on the journey
to and from school. We also found those from the Scheduled Caste or Tribe
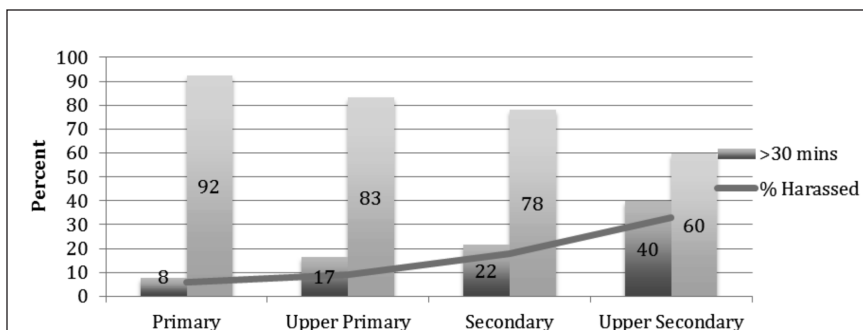backgrounds were significantly more likely to experience this harassment.

Figure 6. Transport time group as less than or more than 30 minutes and incidences of harassment on journey to school (n=403).

Qualitative accounts of the journey to school provide more insight into the source and nature of this harassment. Prathiba outlined her traumatic experience of harassment on the journey to school in her essay on challenges to educational participation.

> [On one occasion] a rickshaw driver had kept his hand on my leg. I tried telling him to stop in 3–4 different ways but he was not willing to and so I threatened him with the Police. He then tried driving away in his rickshaw. I just held him and beat him with my chappal. I was also not able to manage him. Later the people around me also beat him up until his clothes tore.—Prathiba Age 20

Heena, who took the public bus to school, outlines how normalized incidences of harassment were in her daily commute.

> I had to wait for around 2 hours at the bus stand and wait for the 4 o'clock bus. I would feel extremely hungry but there was very little money in my purse. There used to be tremendous rush in the bus both ways while going as well as while coming and the men took great advantage of this fact, especially the older men. Even boys would generally pass vulgar comments, even tease the girls.—Heena, Age 21

Despite the ubiquity of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working on social issues such as education in India, NGOs did not appear to play a significant role in supporting participants' educational progression. For example less than 1 percent reported receiving financial support from NGOs for their education. Clearly, in many cases participants experienced the broader social environment as a constraining and negative influence rather than as a source of encouragement or solidarity.

E. Public Policy Factors

Public policy factors in McLeroy et al.'s model include local, state, and national laws and policies. In this study we focused on participants' experience of government education schemes. Successive governments have had increasing girls' educational participation as central to their national education policies, with mixed results.[38]

In total, more than half the participants in this study (58 percent) reported directly benefiting from one or more government educational scheme at either the primary or secondary level. As Table 4 illustrates, around one quarter of participants benefited from schemes between the lower primary and lower secondary levels, a figure that increases to 37 percent at the upper secondary level.

Table 4. Percentage of students that benefited from one or more Government Schemes by level (n=403)

School Level	Benefited from a Government Scheme
Lower Primary	25%
Upper Primary	21%
Lower Secondary	24%
Upper Secondary	37%

Of those who did benefit from government schemes, 47 percent reported receiving free uniforms, textbooks, or other supplies. Stipends and scholarships were the next most accessed government support, with 26 percent of participants benefitting. Only 9 percent had ever stayed in a government hostel and a mere 2 percent had received a bicycle to facilitate school access. The fact that only a quarter of the study's participants benefited from government scholarship or stipend schemes is deeply concerning. This is particularly so given that nine out of ten of participants come from traditionally marginalized communities, many of which are the target of government education programs.[39] Of further concern, stipends ranged in amount from a meager Rs. 900 ($14) to Rs.1200 ($19) annually. Unsurprisingly, 83 percent of program recipients reported that the supplement was not enough to cover their basic costs. Financial struggle and the absence of transparent guidance

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38. Akanksha Bapna & Namrata Sharma Bapna, School Education in India: A Handbook (2015), *available at* http://www.evaldesign.com/uploads/2/3/8/2/23823775/school_education_india_-__evaldesign.pdf.
39. Caste categories: 27 percent of participants identified as scheduled caste of tribe (SC/ST), 14 percent de-identified caste or tribe (DT/NT), 22 percent special backward caste (SBC), 28 percent other backward caste (OBC) and the remaining 10 percent identified as Open.

about the availability of scholarship schemes loomed large in many of the participants' essays. As Heena notes in the excerpt quoted below, participants often had to rely on informal networks to gather information about their entitlements.

> I did not know anything how to fill up the scholarship form and I would not even have filled it had it not been for a boy from my class who had borrowed my notebook. He wrote the notice about the scholarship in my notebook and when he returned the book I happened to see it after which I inquired about the same with him. He then showed me how to fill up the entire form and that's how I ended up applying.—Heena, Age 21

Others provided examples of the administrative barriers arising during the application process.

> I filled the scholarship form when I was in the eleventh but I did not get my scholarship that year because, due to my financial constraints, I could not procure my caste certificate. Bina- Age 18

Only a small minority of participants (9 percent) reported staying in government hostels during primary or secondary school. Even fewer, just 6 percent, report residing in a government hostel now that they are attending tertiary level. And yet, investment in secondary and college level hostels is a key government intervention strategy in the current five year plan (as it was in the preceding one). The majority of Champions (81 percent) live with their parents. A further 7 percent live with other relatives. Our research suggests that the only government educational incentives that impact the majority of first generation girls in college in Maharashtra are the provision of free books, uniforms, and indirect improvements in school infrastructure. More targeted policies, such as stipend and scholarship schemes, transport subsidies, and safe, girls only hostels are, regrettably, largely absent from their education support structure.

VI. DISCUSSION

While overall national enrollment numbers are increasing, our study indicates that for the marginalized, extraordinary resilience is required to overcome the many well documented and intransigent barriers to educational advancement that continue to deny millions of young Indian women a life enhancing experience. While stories of academic prowess, individual determination, and parental dedication and sacrifice (personal and interpersonal level triggers) are notable as examples of the conversion of social to human capital, they are also cause for concern. Psychologists investigating exceptional educational accomplishment in the face of adversity by children, adolescents, and adults in the United States have noted the critical importance of "grit," defined as

the tendency to sustain interest in, and effort toward, achieving especially challenging aims over years and even decades.[40] Our participants demonstrate remarkable levels of resilience or grit. There is also evidence, however, that the ability to achieve upward mobility can result in longer term poor mental health outcomes.[41] Key social support mechanisms could help young women like these Champions cope with the pressures they face and, in the process, blaze the trail for others. A more egalitarian system could spread the responsibility for active and sustained mentorship more broadly, from the nuclear family and individual teachers to the village governing committees, district, regional, and central government departments, as well as corporate players in business, technology, and industry. Interventions could include the development of schemes to promote informal mentorship by professional women and organized peer support groups.[42]

At the organizational level, the high level of teacher mentorship noted by our respondents is in interesting tension with well-publicized documentation of pervasive teacher absenteeism, apathy, and pedagogical indifference.[43] The individual cases of teacher dedication noted by our Champions need to generalize through a systematic government incentive system. Supporting and rewarding dedicated mentorship by teachers and giving them opportunities to participate in educational decision making may be a crucial strategy for enhancing gender equality in secondary and tertiary education.[44]

The reports of systematized violence particularly at the lower school levels are a critical policy concern. Unsurprisingly, such violence has been shown to decrease learning outcomes and contribute to early drop out.[45] Civil society efforts to address this culture of physical abuse will need to be accompanied by a zero tolerance stance from the government ministries, teacher training, and engagement with school management committees. This research suggests an endemic culture of violence particularly at the primary level. At present, there is widespread evidence of an endemic culture of

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40. Angela L. Duckworth, Christopher Peterson, Michael D. Matthews, & Dennis R. Kelly, *Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals*, 92 J. Personality & Soc. Psychology 1087 (2007).
41. Gene H. Brody, Tianyi Yu, Edith Chen, Gregory E. Miller, Steven M. Kogan & Steven R. H. Beach, *Is Resilience Only Skin Deep? Rural African Americans' Socioeconomic Status–Related Risk and Competence in Preadolescence and Psychological Adjustment and Allostatic Load at Age 19*, 24 Psychological Science 1285 (2013).
42. David L. DuBois, Nelson Portillo, Jean E. Rhodes, Naida Silverthorn, & Jeffrey C. Valentine, *How Effective Are Mentoring Programs for Youth? A Systematic Assessment of the Evidence*, 12 Psychological Science in the Public Interest 57 (2011).
43. Kremer et al., *supra* note 15.
44. Nilofar Vazir & Rakhshinda Meher Vazir, *Mentoring in Teacher Education: Building Nurturing Contexts and Teaching Communities for Rural Primary School Teachers in Sindh, Pakistan*, 13 J. Ed. Res. (2010), *available at* http://ecommons.aku.edu/pakistan_ied_pdck/13.
45. Plan India, *supra* note 37.

violence leading to extreme physical and psychological trauma inflicted on children within the school walls, particularly at the primary level.[46]

At the broader social level questions of inter-gender relations, sexual harassment, and personal security are intricately connected with young women's ability to take advantage of educational opportunity. The data from this study confirm the established yet largely unaddressed concern about pervasive gender violence in India and its impact on the security and well-being of young women in the public sphere. Many of our Champions noted the strains of navigating harassment in their communities, on buses, in friendship groups, and from teachers and others. The results of this study indicate that policy makers and the public who support them, such as those concerned with improving access to educational opportunity for disadvantaged girls, need to craft and vigorously implement zero tolerance policies. These policies, as many have argued,[47] must render sexual harassment unacceptable and consequential for perpetrators so that young, ambitious women from marginalized backgrounds can claim the educational and civic space to which they are entitled.

At the policy level, infrastructure improvements demonstrate the impact of increased government investment in education, particularly in the higher level classes. Strides have been made in improving secondary school construction, sanitation, and road building. However, access to government hostels remains dismally low, resulting in long commutes and significant levels of exposure of girls to sexual harassment and violence. While many of the participants had received government support in the course of their educational careers through the provision of books and uniforms, they and their families continue to be negatively impacted by an educational system plagued by shortcomings. Scholarship schemes are rendered ineffective if they cannot be easily accessed through procedures that are transparent, simple, and reliable.[48] However, many study participants complained about the difficulty in securing scholarships despite their entitlement to assistance. This finding goes some way towards explaining the under-utilization of government scholarships.[49] Our qualitative data confirms the difficulty in finding

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46. Ians Kolkata, *Murder in Classroom: 10-Year-old Dead After Teacher Bangs Boy's Head on Wall*, INDIA TODAY, 17 May 2013, *available at* http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/ten-year-old-student-dies-after-being-brutally-thrashed-by-teacher/1/271666.html.

47. J.S. VERMA, GOPAL SUBRAMANIUM, & LEILA SETH, REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON AMENDMENTS TO CRIMINAL LAW NEW DELHI 415 (2013), *available at* http://www.prsindia.org/uploads/media/Justice%20verma%20committee/js%20verma%20committe%20report.pdf.

48. T. V. SEKHER, SPECIAL FINANCIAL INCENTIVE SCHEMES FOR THE GIRL CHILD IN INDIA: A REVIEW OF SELECT SCHEMES 56 (2010), *available at* http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/UNFPA_Publication-39772.pdf.

49. Aarti Dhar, *Centre To Enhance Income Criteria to Help More Students Under Scholarship Scheme,* THE HINDU, 3 Sept. 2012, *available at* http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/centre-to-enhance-income-criteria-to-help-more-students-under-scholarship-scheme/article3851640.ece.

forms, in completing them, and in submitting them. An outreach system that made forms and advice on their completion accessible in every upper secondary school would rectify this, as would incentives rewarding school administrators who facilitate the college enrollment of their disadvantaged female students.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study shows that the triggers of success for girls who reach college despite severe educational deprivation in their families are largely to be found at the intra and inter personal levels of the girls' social ecology. The study highlights the resilience and familial mentorship necessary to enable young women from disadvantaged backgrounds in Maharashtra to take advantage of the education they are entitled to. In the absence of support at the macro level, (i.e. effective and comprehensive government financial and logistical support of secondary and tertiary educational access) personal relationships are critical. Relying solely on familial and teacher encouragement in such a challenging environment, however, is unsatisfactory as a strategy for realizing social justice. It disadvantages the most vulnerable and represents a failure of governmental responsibility to promote the dignity and empowerment of all members of the population within its jurisdiction. It is at odds with a policy of gender equality and detracts from the advancement of opportunity for those at the bottom of the social ladder.