

Caste Discrimination and Child Marriages: A Case Study on the Gadi Community in Sri Lanka

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1. Introduction

The socio-cultural framework of South Asia is strongly ingrained with caste discrimination, which persists in various aspects of life regardless of constitutional amendments intended to eliminate it. Caste still plays a significant role in determining social status in Sri Lanka today, influencing power dynamics, opportunities, and resource access, especially for marginalized groups like the Rodyias also named as “Gadi”. This group has been historically stigmatized as "untouchable," and as such, they have been pushed to the bottom of the caste hierarchy, where they have been forced to live in poverty and perform menial labour. They have also been excluded from mainstream society (Silva, 1999). Among the most pressing issues facing the Gadi community is the persistence of child marriage, which is strongly associated with poverty, restricted educational opportunities, and deeply ingrained gender stereotypes. Socioeconomic variables and cultural customs that value early marriage as a way to lessen financial obligations and secure dowries have an impact on child marriage in Sri Lanka (De Silva, 1997). Their marginalized status within the broader caste system, along with traditional gender roles, places girls at higher risk of early marriage and its associated negative outcomes, such as limited education, unemployment, poor health conditions, and continued cycles of poverty (Kumar, 2021, Jayasundara, 2011).

The interconnection of caste and gender is critical to understanding the experiences of Gadi women and girls, who face different forms of discrimination. Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach that considers both caste and gender as interconnected forces that shape social inequities in Sri Lanka. This study intends to investigate the nexus between caste and socially sanctioned child marriage in the Gadi’s community. The objective of this study is to explore how far the caste practices put girl children in vulnerable conditions. Examining the socio-cultural aspects of child marriages in this context will enrich the understanding of how caste and gender are embedded in certain practices.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a strong emphasis on ethnographic tools and techniques, enabling an in-depth exploration of caste discrimination and child marriages within the Rodyia community in Sri Lanka. A purposive sampling method is used to select participants who are members of the Rodyia community in Manawa, in Kurunegala District, with a focus on individuals who have direct or indirect experiences with caste discrimination or child marriages. Key informants such as community leaders, midwives, the MoH office, the Development officer assigned from Divisional Secretariat Kuliyaipitaya East, school teachers, and family members are also included to gain diverse perspectives. A total of 30 participants were interviewed until data saturation was achieved. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with midwives, government officers, and teachers and face-to-face interviews were done with the community to gather personal narratives and insights into how caste discrimination and child marriages affect their lives. An interview guide was used to ensure that key themes such as social stigma, economic factors, and family dynamics were covered.

Furthermore, the researcher's observation was also embedded which helped to capture some non-verbal indications and community relationships.

3. Results and Discussion

The following discussion is based on the findings from the qualitative research conducted among members of the Gadi community in Sri Lanka, focusing on caste discrimination and child marriage practices. Data was collected through interviews and observations with the Gadi community in Manawa, Kurunegala District including women who were married as children, local leaders, teachers, midwives, and parents. Historically, the primary source of income for the Gadi people has been begging; they were also referred to as fortune tellers. The Gadi people in this Manawa village are skilled in the tradition of making baskets from cane. They sell their goods to Kegalle, Warakapola, and Kurunegala, and other neighboring places. When they go to sell the items, the villagers give them money in addition to food and other necessities. Unfortunately, only a small number of families currently make baskets; instead, their primary source of income is the collection of discarded plastic and iron goods, which they then segregate and sell to large enterprises. Interviews with community members highlighted that caste-based exclusion is a major factor shaping the lives of the Gadis. The study sample described how they are often denied access to public services, education, and employment opportunities due to their caste status. This systemic marginalization limits their ability to improve their socio-economic conditions, reinforcing cycles of poverty that drive child marriage. It is noted that early marriage is viewed as a survival strategy in a context where opportunities for advancement are limited. Furthermore, the study found that economic hardship is a significant factor in child marriage within the Gadi community. Parents often see early marriage as a means of reducing the financial burden on the family. Girls are frequently married off to reduce the number of dependents in the household.

In the Gadi community, early marriage is a kind of tradition. From history itself, they were socially and economically marginalized by the major society. Thus, women did not acquire any other opportunities in society than to continue their traditional domestic role. These gender-stereotyped practices tend to be early marriages among girls and child marriage is a socially acceptable norm among this community. Patriarchal power relations further enhanced the tradition. Most crucially the lack of access to education worsens this situation. Many girls in the Gadi community drop out of school at a young age due to financial constraints and the perceived lack of value in continuing education. Even the talented and motivated children who entered secondary school in the town were discriminated against by their classmates and as a result, some dropped out of school. "Other students give a strange look on us, they do not share food and books with us, so I felt like a stranger in the class and later dropped the school", this revealed how they were excluded in the school. The low education of parents and lack of knowledge of reproductive health among the elderly people in the community further put girls in a vulnerable situation. Since it is a common practice or considered a norm, elderly women do not see any harm in marrying their girl child at an early age. However, the study revealed that they were fully aware of the marriage law in the country but still child marriage is prevalent. Parents from either party or any other elder relatives safeguard these young couples. The effort taken by Midwives and school teachers to minimize child marriage has become pointless as most of the mothers do not support it. Principle and some teachers stated, "There is no support from family to keep children away from the sexual risk behaviors as parents take it lightly". Furthermore, the study revealed that there are no restrictions on sexual behavior in

the community, and young children are trying to experience sexual relationships. They end up as a married couple. As they were below the accepted age, they hid the case for some period, and when they turned in to the age of 18, they registered their marriage, and at that time some were giving birth to a child as well. Soon after they started living together the couple wanted to have a baby, since infertility is one reason for a boy to leave the girl. For them, marriage registration is not important until the certificate is needed for entrance to the school. Rarely do parents arrange a marriage for their children as a custom. Mostly these marriages are intra-caste marriages and some boys find their partners from outside as they travel in the suburbs. Inter-caste marriages are not very significant and even if it is a case or two those out caste members adopted this Gadi community and were excluded from their original caste groups. Analysing the main findings concludes that social discrimination is the main factor that keeps girls and women in vulnerable conditions. Due to the social exclusion, these groups were isolated from mainstream society, and as a result, access to education and opportunities for economic development are low. Low education keeps them away from the trust on risk factors of child marriages. This was identified during the interviews with midwives and teachers. Strong cultural practices and behaviours are barriers to making aware the community of the risk factors. Those marginalized people have their world within this locality and maintain the same lifestyle patterns as their parents. Family background and socialization have a high impact on child marriages.

4. Conclusion

The research indicates that caste-based marginalization disproportionately affects women and girls, aggravating gendered vulnerabilities within disadvantaged populations. Social exclusion and negative attitudes of society towards marginalized people, patriarchal power relations, poverty, low education, and gender stereotypes are factors that influence child marriage within this caste group. Employing Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital influences social mobility. This community was deprived not only of economic capital but also of social capital. To better understand the delicacies of marginalized experiences and develop more fair and equitable social policies in Sri Lanka and elsewhere, future research and interventions should adopt intersectional and critical theoretical frameworks.

5. Keywords

Caste, Child-marriage, Discrimination, Gender

6. References

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