

# **Voices of Change: Examining the Role of Education on Women's Leadership Roles in Rural Maharashtra, India**

## **DISSERTATION**

---

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the  
Master in International and Development Studies

*Specialization in Gender, Race, and Diversity*

By

Sara Ferrari

Supervisor: Professor Martina Viarengo

Geneva

15 June, 2025

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how women's access to education functions as a pathway to empowerment and influences women's meaningful participation in leadership roles in the labour market in Pune District, Maharashtra. Grounded in existing academic theories and a qualitative fieldwork research design, the study draws on twenty semi-structured individual interviews, two focus group discussions (FGDs), and ethnographic observations conducted in collaboration with the local grassroots organisation, MASUM. By examining the lived experiences of marginalised women, this dissertation challenges linear assumptions linking economic development with gender equality. It depicts education not only as a means for employment but as a transformative process that cultivates agency, confidence, and critical awareness. The results indicate that context-sensitive, feminist pedagogies and support networks are crucial for tackling systemic obstacles affected by caste, class, and patriarchal norms. This thesis contributes to broader debates on development and gender by promoting inclusive, participatory methodologies in educational and empowerment policies.

**Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Education, Development, Leadership, Labour Force Participation, Caste System, Maharashtra.<sup>1</sup>**

---

<sup>1</sup> Parts of the preliminary research, organisation of ideas, and language refinement in this dissertation were supported by the use of AI tools, specifically OpenAI's ChatGPT (Version GPT-4, accessed in 2025). AI assistance was used exclusively for brainstorming, structuring, grammar improvement, and style suggestions. All final analysis, arguments, interpretations, and critical reflections are my own, and AI-generated content was carefully verified, adapted, and rewritten to ensure alignment with the dissertation's objectives and the academic standards of the Geneva Graduate Institute. No confidential, sensitive, or personal data were shared with AI tools during the research process.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I want to thank my thesis supervisor, **Prof. Dr. Martina Viarengo**, for her continuous support, encouragement, and invaluable guidance since September 2023. From her course *Gender, Public Policy, and Development* to the supervision of this thesis, her mentorship has been instrumental throughout. I also thank **Prof. Yuan Zi** for kindly offering to review my work.

My heartfelt gratitude goes to **Dr. Armene Modhi** (dear friend and founder of Ashta No Kai), **Dr. Manisha Gupte**, and **Dr. Ramesh Awasthi** (co-founders of MASUM), along with the entire MASUM team, for warmly welcoming me during my fieldwork and generously sharing their time and insights. Without them, this dissertation would not have happened. Special thanks to Pradnya Kale, my interpreter and patient friend, for her dedication and for ensuring that every voice was accurately translated and represented. I also gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Movetia Internship Scholarship.

To all the women and girls who shared their stories, thank you for your trust. Your strength lies at the heart of this project, and I hope it reflects your courage and determination in standing up for your rights and pursuing your dreams.

I am deeply grateful to my family and friends for their unwavering support. To my mom Tiziana, my dad Corrado, and my brother Gabriele, thank you for standing by me and believing in my dreams. To my grandparents, Grazia, Gianni, Lina, and Francesco, your unconditional love has never made me feel too far away from home. To my friends, near and far, especially Alice, Clara, Chiara, Giulia, Leonie, Matilde, Sara, Silvia, and Josue, I thank you for being my support system in Geneva.

To my beloved Sam, thank you for being my rock. Your love and confidence in me are invaluable.

Finally, thank you to Mother India, my second home. Returning after ten years to conduct this research was a journey of both academic purpose and personal rediscovery.

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS**

**CSO** – Civil Society Organisation

**FGDs** – Focus Group Discussions

**FLFP** – Female Labour Force Participation

**GoI** – Government of India

**GoM** – Government of Maharashtra

**KGBV** – Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya scheme

**LFPR** – Labour Force Participation Rate

**MASUM** – Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal

**MoSPI** – Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation

**NGO** – Non-Governmental Organisation

**NPE** – National Policy Education

**NSO** – National Statistics Office

**OBC** – Other Backward Class

**RMSA** – Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan

**RTE** – Right to Education

**SC** – Scheduled Castes

**SDG** – Sustainable Development Goal

**SSA-I** – Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan

**SSA-II** – Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan

**ST** – Scheduled Tribes

**UNICEF** – United Nations Children's Fund

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVE.....	3
RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY .....	4
SETTING OF THE STUDY .....	5
STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION .....	6
<b>CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....</b>	<b>7</b>
LITERATURE REVIEW .....	7
THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK .....	14
<b>CHAPTER THREE: CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE CASE STUDY .....</b>	<b>18</b>
HISTORICAL AND POLICY BACKGROUND ON WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT IN INDIA.....	18
INTRODUCTION AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE CASE STUDY: PUNE DISTRICT AND MASUM.....	19
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>23</b>
METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH .....	23
RESEARCH QUESTION .....	24
HYPOTHESES.....	25
FIELDWORK STRATEGY AND DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES .....	26
RESEARCH LIMITATIONS .....	32
POSITIONALITY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS .....	33
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS OF FIELD INTERVIEWS .....</b>	<b>35</b>
THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS .....	35
1. WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP.....	37
2. SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS SHAPING WOMEN'S EDUCATION, LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP ASPIRATIONS.....	49
<b>CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>63</b>

ENABLERS AND CONSTRAINTS TO TRANSFORMATIVE EMPOWERMENT .....	63
BEYOND EDUCATION: IS IT ENOUGH? .....	66
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>72</b>
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM INTERVIEWS .....	72
<b>CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY:.....</b>	<b>xc</b>
<b>APPENDIX I: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE (1).....</b>	<b>xcvi</b>
<b>APPENDIX 2: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE VOLLEYBALL GIRLS (2).....</b>	<b>xcix</b>
<b>APPENDIX 3: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE FGD (3).....</b>	<b>c</b>
<b>APPENDIX 4: CONSENT FORM ENGLISH AND MARATHI.....</b>	<b>cii</b>
<b>APPENDIX 5: COMPLETE TABLE WITH SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF PARTICIPANTS.....</b>	<b>cciv</b>
<b>APPENDIX 6: KEY FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS.....</b>	<b>ccvi</b>
<b>APPENDIX 7: PARTICIPANTS CATEGORIES .....</b>	<b>ccvii</b>
<b>APPENDIX 8: MAIN BARRIERS WOMEN FACE IN ACCESSING LABOUR MARKET AND LEADERSHIP POSITIONS .....</b>	<b>ccviii</b>
<b>APPENDIX 9: PHOTOS (A SELECTION WITHOUT PARTICIPANTS TO PRESERVE ANONYMITY).....</b>	<b>ccix</b>

## **LIST OF FIGURES, ILLUSTRATIONS AND TABLES**

<i>Image 1: Map of India with a zoom in on Maharashtra and Pune district .....</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>Table 1: Maharashtra Labour Force Participation Rate for age 15 years and above during period between 2017-2022 (Rural + Urban) .....</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Table 2: Number of participants per geographic location .....</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>Table 3: Participants per age group .....</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>Table 4: Key findings from the interviews .....</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>Table 5: Barriers in accessing education .....</i>	<i>40</i>

<i>Table 6: Main barriers women face in accessing labour market and leadership positions .....</i>	<i>47</i>
<i>Figure 1: Golding's U-Shape Curve .....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Figure 2: LFPR, female (% of female population ages 15+) – India .....</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Figure 3: Maharashtra labour force participation rate (LFPR), age 15 years and above, during the period between 2017 and 2022 (Rural + Urban) (self-created using MoSPI data) .....</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Figure 4: Frequency of financial barriers mentioned vs location .....</i>	<i>52</i>
<i>Figure 5: Main reasons for educational dropout .....</i>	<i>66</i>

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

---

*'In educating women, we educate generations and shape a just society.'*  
(Savitribai Phule – first women teacher in India)

Over the past two decades, India has made major advancements towards expanding access to quality education, particularly for girls (Nielsen & Waldrop, 2014). Enrolment rates of girls in both secondary and tertiary education have increased, reducing the number of out-of-school children. Between 1990 and 2020, gender gaps in educational attainment and labour force participation rates (LFPR) also narrowed. As the world's most populous nation, India now hosts one of the biggest educational systems globally, with over 240 million children enrolled in about 1.5 million schools and taught by more than 9 million teachers (UNICEF, 2019).

According to the World Economic Forum's (WEF) *Global Gender Gap Report 2024*, "India has closed 64.1 per cent" of its overall gender gap and ranks 129th out of 146 countries (World Economic Forum, 2024, p. 32). The report highlights continued progress in educational parity: India ranks first in secondary school enrolment and has made significant improvements in both primary and tertiary education as well. However, "the gap between men's and women's literacy rate is 17.2 percentage points wide", placing India ranked 124th on this indicator (WEF, 2024, p. 33). Despite such educational improvements, outcomes in the labour market remain discouraging. Female labour force participation (FLFP) in India still stands at just 35 per cent, compared to 76.4 per cent for males, reflecting a scarce 45.9 per cent parity in this category (WEF, 2024).

This enduring disparity emphasises a persistent issue: increased access/enrolments to education have not translated proportionally into meaningful employment or leadership opportunities for women. Structural inequalities in educational quality, learning outcomes, and equitable access continue to affect primarily historically marginalised communities, including those defined by caste, class, gender, and geographic location. These groups disproportionately face obstacles that inhibit not only equal access to education but also the transformative potential that education is meant to offer (UNICEF, 2019).

A key area of interest is precisely the gap between women's educational attainment and their access to employment and leadership roles. Although an increasing number of girls are now completing tertiary education and seeking higher qualifications; this does not automatically lead to



equal engagement in the labour market. Hence, progress over time has occurred but there are some gaps that persist, and sometimes even going back India's female labour market participation rate is among the lowest globally, and in some areas, it has declined even as education levels have risen. Women, especially from rural regions, lower castes, and minority groups, frequently encounter many intersecting obstacles, including restricted employment prospects, socio-cultural limitations, safety issues, and institutional bias in recruitment and advancement procedures. These barriers become even more apparent in the leadership sphere. Despite women being more visible across various fields today than they were two decades ago, they remain consistently under-represented in nearly all sectors, including politics, STEM, education, civil society, and business (Kulkarni et al., 2025).

Furthermore, informal leadership roles, like those exercised in village councils or grassroots mobilisations, remain underestimated and inadequately documented, reinforcing the invisibility of women's contributions. Even when women secure leading positions, they frequently face gendered expectations, opposition, and insufficient institutional support, all of which undermine their authority and effectiveness. These dynamics reveal that solely relying on access to education is an insufficient pathway for effective empowerment. Without addressing the socio-economic and cultural factors that shape post-educational outcomes, such as employment opportunities, social mobility, mentorship, and representation, educational reforms risk falling short of their transformative power. Therefore, a more holistic and intersectional approach, including both formal and informal leadership as well as social factors, is needed, one that treats education not only as a human right but also as a catalyst for agency, leadership, and active participation.

While existing literature has previously examined the relationship between education and empowerment, important questions remain about how educational access shapes employment and leadership prospects for women within particular socio-economic contexts. This dissertation seeks to bridge this gap by investigating the following research question: **How does access to education as a pathway to women's empowerment influence their meaningful participation in both formal and informal leadership roles in Pune district, Maharashtra?**

To explore this question, the dissertation employs a mixed-methods approach grounded primarily in field-based qualitative research. Primary data was collected in Pune district, Maharashtra, through twenty semi-structured individual interviews and two focus group discussions (FGD) with a range of stakeholders, including staff and participants of MASUM's (a grassroots NGO) programmes, local community members, and village representatives. These

interviews are complemented by detailed ethnographical observations during the two months of fieldwork. Primary data were collected through twenty semi-structured individual interviews and two focus group discussions (FGD) with a range of stakeholders in the Pune district, such as staff and participants of MASUM (a grassroots NGO), the local community, and village representatives. These interviews were complemented by detailed ethnographic observations collected over the two months in the field. By combining these two approaches, the dissertation offers a comprehensive understanding of how women empowerment through educational attainment affects women's access to the local labour market and their aspirations for leadership, and how regional socio-economic factors impact these outcomes.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVE**

Despite decades of efforts aimed at economic growth and educational reforms, India continues to confront enduring gender inequalities, especially regarding women's post-education opportunities to enter the labour market and be economically active. National and regional development policies often assume that economic modernisation will inherently lead to gender equality, yet the persistence of unequal outcomes suggests otherwise. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms, caste discrimination, class-based inequalities, and institutional obstacles continue to influence and limit women's opportunities, particularly in rural and urban areas.

The dissertation explores the relationship between access to education and women's empowerment, focusing on how education influences women's participation in both formal and informal leadership roles in Pune district. The research contributes to academic debates in development, economics, and gender studies by challenging linear assumptions that associate progress with equality. Although Maharashtra is often considered one of the most progressive states regarding educational policy and economic development, the translation of these policies into real empowerment outcomes remains inconsistent and underexplored across caste and class lines.

This research wants to investigate how women experience and perceive leadership, the impact of education, grassroots efforts (such as those led by MASUM) and governmental regulations on their empowerment, and what obstacles persist. Understanding the dynamics of these gaps, how they emerge, shift, and are exacerbated in different contexts, is central to identifying the barriers and potential levers of change. This is an area where academic knowledge, especially in rural and urban Indian contexts, remains limited.

As previously explained, the dissertation draws on qualitative fieldwork to capture the voices and lived experiences of local women as they navigate and pursue empowerment on their own terms (Klotz & Prakash, 2008). Rather than relying exclusively on theoretical models, the research places the lived experiences of local women at the forefront by posing the following question: *Has education translated into tangible opportunities for women? What barriers persist today? And how do women themselves define effective empowerment strategies?*

This study extends the definition of leadership beyond formal positions to include daily grassroots leadership, such as decision-making within families, community mobilisation, peer mentoring, and informal influence in the workplace. In doing so, it underlines how educational access and empowerment efforts enhance women's capacity to assert agency and shape outcomes across several domains of life. This approach clarifies the complex essence of empowerment and how it is experienced, restricted, and negotiated in relation to local power frameworks.

Historically men have enjoyed systematic advantages in obtaining leading positions, partly due to their privileged access to education and entrenched patriarchal norms (Smith, 2025). Hence, this study also interrogates how women navigate opportunities and constraints in contemporary workplaces and community settings, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of how development, education and gender interact in real life. In addition to its academic investigation purposes, this dissertation seeks to offer concrete policy recommendations that address structural barriers and foster inclusive, context-specific, and sustainable measures.

## **RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY**

This dissertation is relevant for both academic and policymaking purposes. It fills a critical research gap by understanding how education functions as a pathway to empowerment and leadership for women in a specific regional context, in urban and rural Pune. Such analysis is often overlooked in mainstream gender and development literature. Through a grounded, intersectional understanding, it offers insights into how caste, class, and social norms interact in relation to education and labour force participation (Jayachandran, 2021).

Practically, the study responds to ongoing policy debates in India regarding the effectiveness of existing gender and education efforts. The findings offer practical insights for policymakers, NGOs, and development stakeholders aiming to advance inclusive empowerment initiatives and mitigate the still too common gender-based inequalities. By emphasising the

interventions women recognise as effective and the challenges they face, the study supports a shift towards locally grounded, feminist, and participatory solutions that go beyond access and address systemic factors that determine women's ability to lead, influence, and prosper.

## SETTING OF THE STUDY

The scope of this study is limited to Pune district in the state of Maharashtra, India. According to *World Population Review (WPR) 2025*, Pune is the “second largest in the state of Maharashtra and the ninth largest city in the country” (WPR, 2025). The district has a population of 9.4 million, among whom 4.9 million were counted as male and 4.5 million were counted as female (WPR, 2025). The Government of Maharashtra (GoM) does not account for individuals who do not identify as either female or male in their calculations. Additionally, “62 per cent of the population is under 30, with a larger-than-average share of people in the 25-34 age group” (WPR, 2025). The literacy rate in Pune stands at “86 per cent overall, 90 per cent for men and 81 per cent for women” (WPR, 2025). Like “many cities in India, there is a larger share of men than women” (Census, 2011; WPR, 2025).

The region serves as a significant case study because of its dual identity: Maharashtra possesses a rich history of progressive social reform, dynamic women's movements, and state-sponsored initiatives, especially for education. Importantly, post-colonial Maharashtra has historically played a pioneering role in the development of India's modern education system, and it is home to some of the earliest educational reforms and institutions that promote female education and social mobility (Patel, 2014). Pune, as a prominent urban centre within Maharashtra, serves as an ideal microcosm for this study. The city's rich educational legacy is exemplified by pioneering figures such as Savitribai Phule, one of India's first female teachers and a key advocate for women's education (Times of India, 2021).

This further reinforces its relevance as a focal point for analysing the broader socio-political trends linked to women's empowerment and education in the region. However, the entrenched urban-rural divides, along with entrenched caste, class, and gender hierarchies, continue to display deep-rooted structural inequities (Times of India, 2021). These constantly influence women's access to education and participation in the labour market. The city's rapid urbanisation, along with its proximity to rural areas, provides a diverse landscape to investigate the extent to which education acts as a catalyst for women's empowerment and entry into leadership positions across different socioeconomic contexts. Although the findings of this study may not be applicable to all

Indian states due to cultural and socio-economic variation, they offer important information regarding overarching national trends and difficulties concerning women's empowerment via education and leadership.

## **STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION**

This study consists of nine chapters. After the introduction, Chapter Two reviews the literature on women's empowerment, education, labour force participation, and leadership and outlines the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that guide the analysis. It then concludes by positioning this dissertation within the broader academic debate, identifying key gaps and tensions in current scholarship and demonstrating the importance of a more intersectional and regionally grounded analysis of educational empowerment. Chapter Three situates the study within its broader socio-political and historical context, focusing on women's education, policy developments, and intersectional dynamics in Maharashtra with a specific focus on Pune district. This chapter also introduces the case study and provides background information on the MASUM organisation. Chapter Four delineates the research design and methodology, comprising the fieldwork strategy, data collection methods, and ethical considerations. Chapter Five presents the findings from the thematic analysis of the field interviews and FGDs structured around key themes that emerged from the data. Chapter Six critically discusses these findings considering existing literature and theories, while Chapter Seven translates them into concrete and actionable policy recommendations. Finally, Chapter Eight concludes the dissertation by summarising key insights, reflecting on research contributions, and outlining directions for future research and actions.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

---

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a comprehensive scholarly review of existing literature from different disciplines, including economics, development studies, and sociology. It establishes the foundational pillars underpinning this dissertation: 1) the role of education in developing and empowering women; 2) feminist and intersectional approaches to empowerment; 3) sociocultural barriers to women's education, labour force participation, and leadership. The chapter concludes by identifying key gaps in current literature and positioning this dissertation within the broader academic debate, demonstrating the importance of a more multidimensional and regionally grounded analysis of educational empowerment.

### 1. THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN DEVELOPMENT AND IN EMPOWERING WOMEN

#### *1.1 Mutually Reinforcing Relationship Between Education and Development*

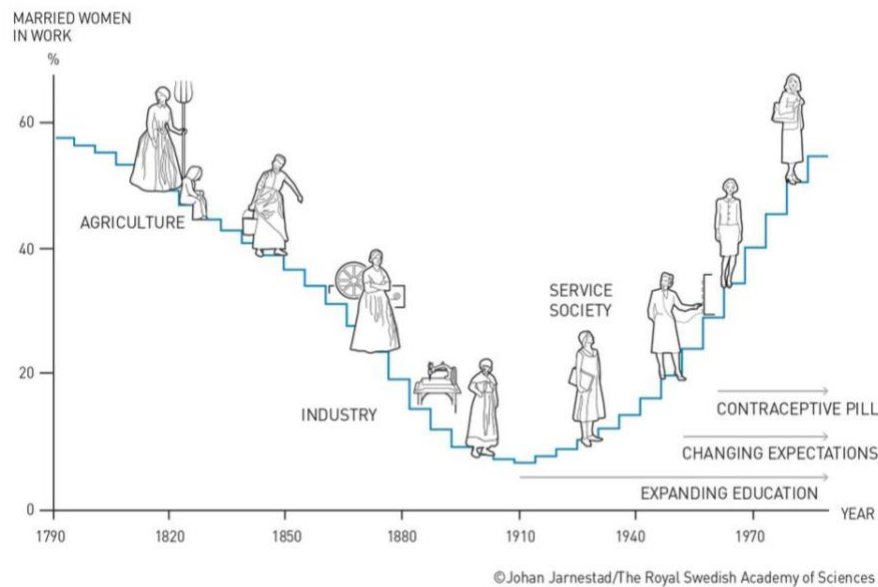
Education is the most powerful tool for achieving social justice and equality, and it must benefit every citizen by ensuring learning opportunities are not limited by circumstances of birth or background (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974). The relationship between education and development is widely acknowledged as mutually reinforcing, with education serving as both driver and outcome of societal progress. Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000), through their capability approach, have extensively articulated how education expands individuals' freedoms and opportunities, thereby enhancing their overall well-being and capacity to lead lives they value. Sen's perspective on human development is predominantly economic, both in focus and content, whereas Nussbaum's approach is more philosophical and ethical (Gluchman, 2018). She views education as the "engine" of human development in both its individual and societal dimensions (Gluchman, 2018, p. 329). Education yields significant social and economic returns, particularly for girls and women. Women tend to allocate more resources for their children, contribute to household welfare, engage in the labour force, generate revenue, claim their rights, and achieve

greater influence in both household and public life (MoSPI & NSO, 2024). Education, in this view, is not merely about acquiring skills but about fostering human flourishing and expanding choices, which are central to development. It is essential for empowering women and reducing gender-based inequalities and socio-economic opportunities.

This perspective extends beyond formal schooling to include non-formal and informal education initiatives, which are particularly crucial for marginalised communities who may face barriers to traditional educational pathways (Almeida & Morais, 2024). Both forms of education contribute to expanding individuals' freedoms and opportunities, contributing to their positive development (Sen, 1999). However, formal education is supported by the state and is recognised through exams and certificates, while non-formal and informal are not. Nevertheless, these alternative avenues can provide essential literacy, numeracy, and life skills, often tailored to specific local contexts and community needs (Almeida & Morais, 2024). Increased educational attainment and women literacy have a significant impact on societal progress, often correlating with improved health outcomes, reduced fertility rates, and greater economic stability for families and mainly their daughters across generations. This intergenerational impact has been well documented to have a crucial role in breaking the poverty cycle.

## ***1.2 Determinants of Labour Force Participation***

The relationship between female labour force participation (FLFP) and economic development has been studied by Claudia Golding (1995) to be U-shaped (*Figure 1*), a trend observed in India as well. Her research highlights that in agrarian societies, women's participation in the job market was high, especially when work was close to home (Goldin, 1995). However, with industrialisation, work shifted further from home, leading many women to withdraw from the labour market to focus on domestic responsibilities, thus moving "down to the bottom of the U" (Goldin, 1995). Later, the beginning of the widespread availability of contraceptives enabled women to invest longer periods of education, which in turn allowed them to re-enter the job market in the second part of the U-curve (Goldin, 1995). The growth of the service sector and the shift towards more flexible, white-collar jobs further this increase in women's participation. Goldin's (1995) work emphasises that while women desire choice in balancing family and work, this choice is often constrained, particularly when they become mothers (after the first child).

*Figure 1: Golding's U-Shape Curve*

Another renowned scholar investigated the potential of education for development. Gary Becker (1962)'s Human Capital Model established the fundamentals for most of the work in the economics of education. The model shows that an individual invests in education with an expectation that the investment will yield increased wages (Becker, 1962). This is reiterated by Goldin (1995), who elucidates that the definition of human capital revolves around the concept that investments in individuals, such as education, enhance workers' productivity and skill sets. This theory emphasises the prevalent notion that as an individual attains greater education, their unique expertise becomes more desirable, hence enhancing their human capital (Robinson and Pope, 2023). However, despite the evident benefits of education, a disconnect persists because, in the example of India, women increasingly pursue higher levels of education (even surpassing their male counterparts), but they still struggle to enter and remain in the labour market. While not all women may choose to work, education provides them with greater bargaining power within the household, ensuring they have choices regarding their life prospects.

### ***1.3 Debates About Empowerment***

'Empowerment' is a widespread term, often used in many sectors, like the nonprofit world, academia, the private sector, and daily conversations. But what does 'empowerment of women' genuinely entail? The notion of women's empowerment was initially introduced by academics and feminists around the 70s and was used for achieving gender equality in development (Cornwall &



Rivas, 2015). However, it was extensively debated in the subsequent two decades (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). It was deemed a radical approach that entailed altering power dynamics to promote “women's rights, social justice, and the reformation of economic, social, and political frameworks” (p. 404). Originally, it was seen as a grassroots concept and effort, but it was soon adopted by other international agencies, as its broad appeal facilitated its expansion beyond radical contexts into the sphere of development. Because the word “empowerment” is used in many different contexts, it also has different definitions and understandings, making it a complex and ambiguous term to comprehend. There is still no clear and definitive interpretation of 'women's empowerment'; however, many scholars have attempted to give it a nuanced and comprehensive meaning. For example, Kabeer (2005)’s concept of women's empowerment refers to the process through which individuals who have been previously “denied the ability” to make strategic decisions acquire the capacity to do so (p. 13). Empowerment is closely related to the notion of power; thus, it involves transforming power relations by enabling women to access resources, make decisions, and shape their social and economic futures (Kabeer, 2005). However, women’s empowerment is not a one-time solution; it requires a comprehensive framework that addresses their needs throughout their lives. It entails guaranteeing women's equitable access to quality employment, social security, education, and resources while facilitating their active involvement in economic decision-making across all tiers. Empowerment must begin at the household level, where women can influence financial decisions and resource allocation, and it extends to communities through meaningful participation in local business and cooperatives.

#### ***1.4 Pathways to Empowerment and its Societal Impact***

According to the World Bank Group (WBG) (2024a), women's empowerment encompasses access to education, economic independence, household decision-making, and political engagement. Scholarly discourse often emphasises that empowerment involves change/transformation. This can only be achieved by removing barriers across levels that limit women’s ability to exercise choice and control (WBG, 2024a). Therefore, it is not only about access but about providing meaningful and equal opportunities across fields and challenging systems of inequality. Batliwala (2015) characterises women’s empowerment as a process enabling marginalised women to effectuate durable alterations in gender structures through the formulation of their own agendas and movements. The empowerment of women must focus on the expanding of their choices and opportunities so they can have the option of making decisions freely and safely, without fear that one decision will limit their future options (Batliwala, 2015). Already in the 80s scholars like

Tocqueville (1835) established that women's participation in decision-making is vital for a country's development, progress, and democratisation. More contemporarily, it is widely recognised that women's involvement brings positive societal transformations, influencing laws, policies, institutions, and social norms (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Ban & Rao, 2006; and Riman et al., 2023). Ensuring women have a voice in decisions affecting their lives, families, and communities is key to improving their quality of life. Given that these decisions affect both women and men, equal representation is essential. Society must ensure women more equitable opportunities to participate at all levels, fostering diverse and inclusive decision-making bodies.

### ***1.5 Challenges of Measuring Empowerment***

Measuring women's empowerment presents challenges, particularly in quantifying their often-invisible contributions, such as unpaid household and caregiving labour. Despite its omission from national economic records, this activity is essential for the economy's operation. Time usage surveys, which record how individuals distribute their time among various paid and unpaid activities, serve as an essential tool for quantifying this concealed dimension of women's labour. The “Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) objective 5.4 underscores the acknowledgement and valuation of unpaid care and domestic labour” by investments in public services, infrastructure, and social protection measures, while also advocating for the equitable distribution of responsibilities within households and families (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), 2024). MoSPI (2024)'s Time and Use Survey between 2019 and 2024, reveals important patterns in the allocation of unpaid domestic work, highlighting gender disparities. While female participation had a slight increase from 81.2 per cent in 2019 to 81.5 percent in 2024, male participation also slightly rose from 26.1 to 27.1 per cent over the same period (MoSPI, 2024). This highlights that although there is a slight increase in male participation, the overall disparity remains substantial. This vast gap signifies that women continue to bear a disproportionate burden of domestic and care responsibilities which significantly limit their opportunities for education, formal employment and participation in the public sphere (MoSPI, 2024). This enduring inequality emphasises a significant obstacle to attaining authentic gender parity and stresses the necessity for more extensive governmental initiatives and societal transformations to revalue and redistribute unpaid labour.

### ***1.6 Policies and Progress in Advancing Women's Education in India***

Education is universally acknowledged as a public good and an inherent human right, forming the foundations of equitable and democratic societies (UNESCO, 2023). Over the last two decades, the Government of India (GoI) has made substantial strides in promoting women's education, attempting to bridge the gap between gender and social category gaps through several schemes and policies (Arora, 2025). Key initiatives began with the *National Policy on Education (NPE)* of 1986, which recognised women and girls' education as essential for their empowerment (Ministry of Education (MoE), 2023). This led to the creation of the *Mahila Samakya (Women's Equality)* program. This commitment was further solidified by the 86th amendment and the *Right to Education (RTE) Act* of 2009, which made free education a fundamental right for children aged 6 to 14. Moreover, building on the 2001 *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA-I)*, the 2018 Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA-II) scheme, which provides accessible transport, free uniforms, textbooks, trained female teachers, and separate girls' toilets, further ensures equitable quality elementary education (Mir & Swaroopa, 2024; Arora, 2025). This scheme later broadened in scope and included the *Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA)* as well as the *Teacher Education (TE)* schemes. What is common between SSA-I and SSA-II is the focus on girl-child education, which led to initiatives like the *Kasturba Gandhi Kanya Vidyalaya (KGBV)* creating residential schools for disadvantaged girls and the enhancement of the *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)* to increase girls' enrolment, retention, and overall education. While these efforts have significantly improved national literacy rates, marked urban-rural disparities persist, particularly affecting marginalised women, with rural women remaining the least literate (MoSPI, 2024). To counter historical inequalities and discrimination of marginalised populations, like Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC), the GoI came up with an affirmative action strategy called the 'reservation system'. This strategy is implemented in educational institutions, legislative assemblies, panchayats, and public agencies, which resulted in a significant increase in representation. Nevertheless, the lack of monitoring procedures to streamline reservations often leads to the dominance of the elite within these castes to control this system.

## **2. FEMINIST AND INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES TO EMPOWERMENT**

This dissertation draws on feminist and intersectional approaches developed by scholars like Naila Kabeer (1999, 2005, 2021), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991, 2013), and Nelly Stromquist (2002, 2015) to critically analyse women's empowerment through education, employment, and leadership.

Feminist literature challenges top-down or instrumentalist models of empowerment that may reduce it to economic productivity or 'token' leadership. Instead, they frame empowerment as a relational, political, and context-specific process involving shifts in power dynamics and self-determination. Therefore, these feminist approaches move beyond individual-level analysis to interrogate how societal factors like caste, class, and gender shape women's lived experiences.

Kabeer (1999) identifies three interconnected levels of empowerment: "i) the 'deeper level', [which refers] to the understanding of structural relations such as interaction between caste, class, and gender; the 'intermediate' level, [meaning the] awareness of institutional rules and resources; and the 'immediate' level, [referring to] the set of individual resources, agency, and achievements" (Stromquist, 2002, p. 436). Similarly, Stromquist (2002) complements this with four dimensions of empowerment through education: "cognitive (critical comprehension of reality), psychological (self-esteem), political (knowledge of injustices and ability to mobilise), and economic (ability to earn income)" (p. 3). She argues that meaningful empowerment often requires external assistance, with women-led organisations and NGOs playing an essential role in fostering both individual and collective agency at local, national, and regional levels (Stromquist, 2002, p. 14). Due to the hesitant state support in many developing countries, international actors often become vital in sustaining significant and enduring gender movement (Stromquist, 2002, p. 14).

An intersectional feminist perspective is particularly relevant in the Indian context where caste and gender intersect to impact educational and leadership prospects, especially for disadvantaged and marginalised groups of women. Crenshaw's (1991) research on the different experiences of violence among women of colour in the US laid the foundations for understanding how overlapping identities produce compounded forms of discrimination. Similarly, Kabeer (2016) uses the term 'intersecting inequalities' to underline that the most enduring forms of group-based disadvantages are predominantly associated with identities inherited at "birth, like race, caste, gender and ethnicity" (p. 55). These difficulties exacerbate and define their long-term marginalisation. Thus, analysing empowerment, education, and employment through an intersectional lens is crucial for a nuanced dissertation, as each women's access to opportunities or exposure to constraints is shaped by the intersecting dimensions of her identities.

## **GAP IN LITERATURE AND THESIS CONTRIBUTION**

Despite growing research on education and women empowerment, a significant gap remains, especially concerning the link between education, empowerment and women's meaningful

participation in leadership roles. While studies acknowledge the importance of education for empowerment and economic participation, few explicitly connect these three elements in a comprehensive framework, especially within the context of Maharashtra. A nuanced analysis of women's post-education trajectory, covering labour market entry, retention and advancement into leadership roles, remains underexplored. Moreover, existing literature often neglects local leadership and grassroots involvement.

This dissertation addresses these gaps by thoroughly investigating the complex relationship between educational access and women's empowerment, with a special focus on their meaningful involvement in leadership within Maharashtra and Pune district (Urban and Rural). It aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of whether education acts as a catalyst for women's meaningful employability, extending beyond surface-level correlations to investigate in-depth insights influenced by socio-cultural factors and based on lived experiences.

## **THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

This section of the chapter will reflect on the main theories of the concepts core to the framing of this research. First a comparison of the different conceptualizations and theories is made and then the definition that will be adopted for this study is chosen. Before delving in the practical side of the research it is crucial to understand the foundational elements.

### ***1. Education***

The study follows the understanding of education through the development lens. According to Harber (2014), education is a crucial social institution that has a major and positive influence on shaping behaviour, values, and opportunities of individuals and societies. Coombs and Ahmed (1974) identify three types of education: *informal* (acquired through daily experiences), *nonformal* (structured learning outside formal institutions), and *formal education* (state-recognised, hierarchically structured schooling from primary to tertiary levels). The main difference between these two is the deliberate structure and accreditation, as nonformal education is organised but lacks official recognition, while formal education is officially sanctioned and graded (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974). This dissertation acknowledges all three types of education but mainly focuses on the formal type of education and its role in enhancing women's opportunities, particularly in relation to labour market access and leadership. By examining how formal education intersects with other social

determinants, the research investigates whether and how schooling functions as pathway to empowerment and socioeconomic mobility for women in Maharashtra.

## ***2. Women Empowerment***

Based on pre-existent literature, this study adopts Kabeer's (1999) definition of women's empowerment, which refers to the process through which individuals who have been previously denied the ability to make strategic decisions acquire the capacity to do so and shape their social and economic futures. This dissertation focuses predominantly on women's empowerment within rural Maharashtra, particularly exploring how intersecting factors like caste, class, and gender influence access to education and opportunities for leadership. It employs a transformational perspective, acknowledging empowerment as both a result and a process rooted in social change and collective expression. Additionally, this research recognises that oftentimes the term "women empowerment" is used in development academia and initiatives as a buzzword and catchphrase (Smile Foundation, 2023). Hence, this dissertation aims to adopt the most holistic approach to understanding and studying women empowerment, considering the interconnectedness of social, economic, political, and cultural factors that impact women's lives (Smile Foundation, 2023). The multidimensional and complex barriers women still face deserve and require a nuanced and holistic approach. Hence, this thesis also highlights the importance of creating a supportive environment for women to thrive in all aspects of their lives.

## ***3. Education as Pathway to Women's Empowerment***

Education is one of the most important tools for societal, economic, and political change (Chandra, 2025). In this study education is conceptualised *as a pathway to women's empowerment* whereby access to the process of learning through both formal (schools, colleges) and informal (workshops, self-teaching) channels enhances women's agency, confidence, and ability to challenge social norms (Jayachandran, 2021). Contingent on women's choice to invest in it. Beyond providing cognitive skills, education also cultivates non-cognitive skills such as self-esteem, resilience, and communication, which are crucial for civic participation and leadership and for shaping future citizens and generations. As Nunoo et al. (2024) argue, education should not be regarded merely in terms of direct labour market returns but also as a means of fostering broader personal and social transformations. Education also enhances women's relative bargaining power in both households and labour markets, although the extent and mechanisms of this influence can vary. In rural

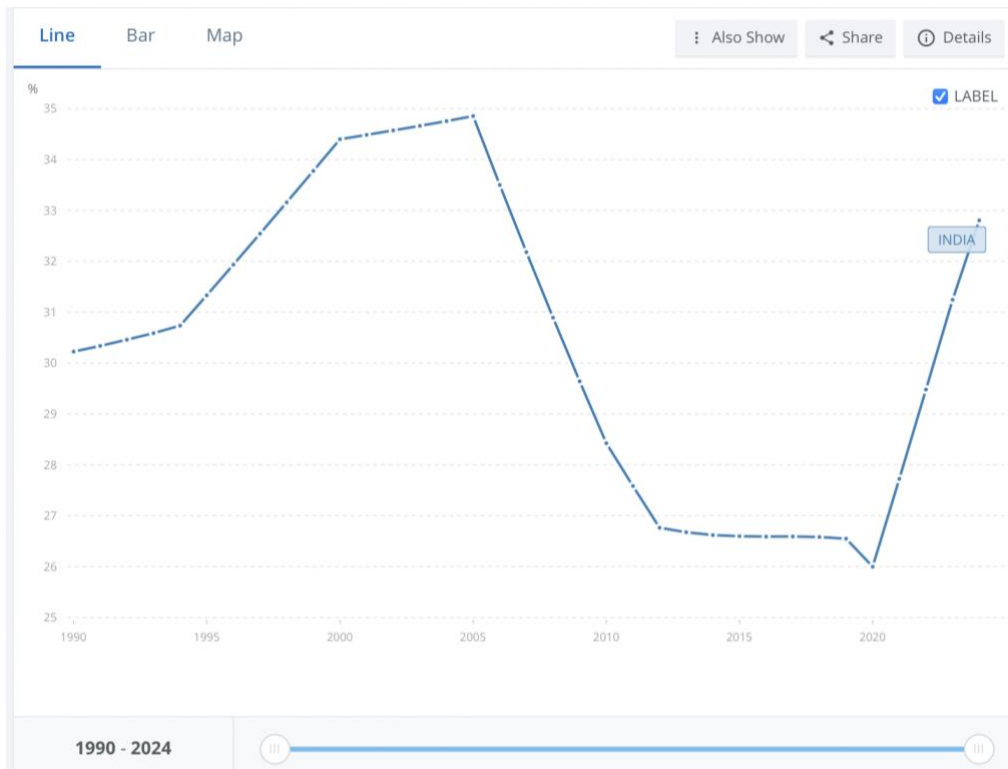
Maharashtra, I specifically examine how women's educational experiences, especially those provided by government public schools and NGOs' workshops and trainings, enhance women's self-esteem and civic engagement.

### ***3. Labour Market (Outcomes)***

The labour market refers to “the actual or virtual space within an economy where those offering their labour (employees) negotiate an accord with those procuring it (employers)” (Eurostat, 2024). Labour market outcomes such as employment rates, job quality, and occupational status are key indicators of the relationship between education and economic opportunities (OECD, 2025). There is a strong correlation between educational attainment and labour market participation, regardless of whether participation is evaluated by employment, unemployment, or economic inactivity rates (OECD, 2025). However, gender disparities persist women typically demonstrate lower employment rates than men even with similar education qualifications (Verick, 2014). This discrepancy tends to diminish with higher educational attainment but is often influenced by traditional gender norms, which influence women's life choices. For example, women considering caring responsibilities at home instead of pursuing career advancement may demonstrate less motivation to acquire higher education, leading to lower educational achievement (Verick, 2014). While education is often viewed in terms of its labour market returns – e.g., higher wages or improved career opportunities – this study adopts a broader perspective (Vishwakarma & Gupta, 2024). It does not reduce education solely to its economic value but considers it as a potential catalyst of women's empowerment, leadership, and agency, particularly in contexts influenced by systemic inequalities and gendered norms. Educational attainment helps determine the variations in labour force participation for both men and women (OECD, 2012). This study investigates FLFP, defined as the percentage of working-age women (15 or older) who are employed or actively seeking employment, and extends the analysis to include leadership roles as a significant element of career dynamics and opportunities (OECD, 2012; Verick, 2014). Leadership is understood not only in formal employment but also in informal spaces where women demonstrate agency and visibility. In urban settings, women may access formal jobs (teaching, government jobs) yet still face barriers to leadership roles (*Figure 2*). While, in rural areas, much of the economic activity is in agriculture and informal or unpaid work.

These interconnected concepts establish a solid framework for this research, connecting theory and practice to explore how education, empowerment, and leadership intersect.

Figure 2: Labour force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+ (modeled ILO estimates) – India<sup>2</sup>



<sup>2</sup> World Bank Open Data. (2025). (See bibliography).



## CHAPTER THREE: CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE CASE STUDY

---

### HISTORICAL AND POLICY BACKGROUND ON WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT IN INDIA

The history of women's education in India reflects a complex interplay of cultural, social, and political influences (Mir & Swaroopa, 2024, p. 221). In ancient times, women's education was highly valued in certain academic traditions (Mir & Swaroopa, 2024). However, the mediaeval era marked a decline in women's educational prospects, largely due to cultural and religious limitations that “prioritised domestic duties and limited access to formal education” (Mir & Swaroopa, 2024, p. 221). During British colonial rule, reforms emerged advancing women's education and abolishing harmful “practices like Sati (dowry) and child marriage” (Mir & Swaroopa, 2024, p. 221), though access remained limited.

Post-independence, the Indian government strengthened its focus on gender equality in education through legal and policy directives (Mir & Swaroopa, 2024). A major milestone was the Right to Education Act (RTE) in 2009 which guaranteed free and compulsory education for children aged six and fourteen years, including girls (Mir & Swaroopa, 2024; Arora, 2025). While the RTE sought to improve enrolment rates and quality education, implementation challenges persisted (Mir & Swaroopa, 2024). Socio-cultural norms, economic hardship, and geographical inequalities continue to hinder equitable access for women and girls. Another major education reform shift included the reservation system (a type of affirmative action) introduced under British rule and formalised by the GoI. This system allocated specific percentages of reserved ‘quotas’ in higher education, employment, political bodies, etc., for SC and ST (NEP 2020; Meshram, 2022, p. 2).

In the employment sector, initiatives like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), the National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, and various sector-specific programs have been implemented to promote women's participation in the workforce, especially in rural regions (Press Information Bureau (PIB), 2021). The Government's Stand-Up India plan and the Skill India Mission have lately focused on women's self-employment and skill enhancement (Press Information Bureau (PIB), 2021).

Notwithstanding these initiatives, women's labour market participation in India is among the lowest worldwide, affected by overlapping obstacles such as gender norms, restricted mobility, and insufficient work possibilities. The persistent conflict between progressive legislation and established prejudice underscores the need for continuous and integrative strategies to guarantee educational and job access for all women (Mir & Swaroopa, 2024).

## **INTRODUCTION AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE CASE STUDY: PUNE DISTRICT AND MASUM**

Non-government organisations (NGOs) play a vital role in advancing women's education and empowerment in India (Chandra, 2025). Grassroots NGOs in particular respond to specific local challenges by providing educational resources, organising awareness campaigns, and advocating for policy reforms (Mir & Swaroopa, 2024, p. 212). Community-orientated initiatives like offering workshops, scholarships for education, sport initiatives and community learning centres facilitate girls' retention and performance among girls (Mir & Swaroopa, 2024, p. 212).

The context directly informs my research question by underscoring the significance of community rooted approaches to empowerment. It also aligns with my multidimensional and intersectional framework, which examines how caste, class and gender norms shape educational and employment opportunities for women.

## **THE CASE OF NGO MASUM**

MASUM<sup>3</sup> (Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal), meaning 'Women's Forum for Integrated Development' was founded in "1987 by Dr. Manisha Gupte and Dr. Ramesh Awasthi during their five-year residency in the drought-affected Purandar block of Pune district" (MASUM, n.d.). Operating in over forty villages, MASUM's work is deeply embedded in the local community and led predominantly by women from marginalized backgrounds. MASUM has three main offices, one in Hadapsar in Pune City, and then other two offices in the rural areas of the district, one in Saswad, Purandar and the other in Mhalshiras (original office of MASUM), Purandar.

---

<sup>3</sup> Most of this information is derived from the MASUM website (<https://www.masum-india.org.in/index.html>) and my field notes.

Guided by a feminist and human-rights based approach, MASUM seeks to empower rural women through integrated initiatives spanning education, health, economic empowerment, gender-based violence prevention, and political participation. Its programmes address the intersecting structures of caste, class, religion and patriarchy, recognising the heterogeneity of women's experiences. For example, MASUM's has helped the community set up self-help groups (SHGs) where people from the community can unite to discuss issues, share experiences, and assist one another.

Lastly, MASUM is also committed to training and augmenting the capabilities of NGOs, community-based organisations (CBOs), and various actors to improve access to economic, social, and cultural rights (ESC) at both state and national levels. It is recognised as a reputable training institution "specialising in gender, health rights, and economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), violence against women (VAW)", and the rights of Dalits and minorities (MASUM, n.d.).

MASUM was chosen for its long-standing commitment to fostering women's leadership, its rights-based engagement with the state, and its deep-rooted local presence. The organization's holistic and intersectional approach, along with its emphasis on community participation and second-line leadership, provides rich foundations or analysing how empowerment is enacted and experienced in practice. MASUM's community connections developed over the past forty years have facilitated a more comprehensive approach to interviewing various women and conducting focus group discussions (FGDs) with village residents. Moreover, the purpose of this study is in no way to pit or compare the 'community' women against the MASUM staff women, since the latter also are themselves women from the same community.

### ***MASUM Education Fellowship Programme***

This program started in 2017/2018, where 100 girls get chosen from 40 different villages out of 100 present in the Purandar area (rural). They get chosen for this program according to a criterion composed of 4 elements: a) they have a single parent, b) they are part of a Scheduled Caste or other very low castes, c) they are part of Schedule Tribes, so marginalised communities, and d) they come from economically disadvantaged areas. The girls get chosen either through school visits from MASUM personnel or personal visits to some families. Through these scholarships, MASUM wants to stop girls from getting early marriages. To keep them busy so the parents don't face the pressures of marrying their daughters. This fellowship provides them with free education and other

services like accommodation, safe transport, books, food, medicines, etc. from 5th standard until 10th standard (last year of school), and then if they want to pursue a bachelor's or master's degree of their choice, MASUM can also assist them. Three girls I interviewed mentioned that the only reason why they managed to access higher education is thanks to MASUM's fellowship because otherwise the expenses were too high for the families.

### ***MASUM Empowerment Through Sport Programme***

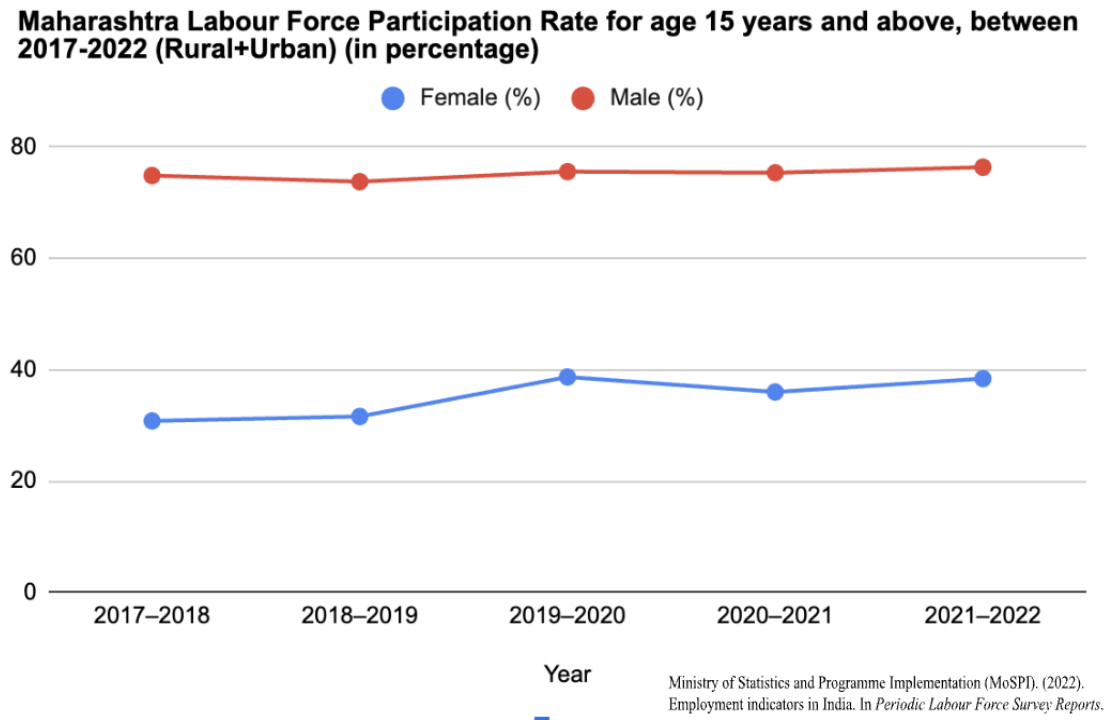
The program consists of empowering young girls through physical activity in the form of volleyball classes. It is led by one MASUM staff woman who is also the Coach in the schools and prepares the teams for local competitions. It was designed to foster leadership, confidence, and collective agency among adolescent girls in rural villages of Pune district. The girls taking part in this initiative are between the ages of 10 and 15 (from 5th to 10th standard). By engaging in physical activity: girls not only challenge restrictive gender norms surrounding mobility and visibility in public spaces but also build critical soft skills such as communication, discipline, and mutual support. The volleyball program acts as a socially accepted entry-point for wider conversations on rights, health, and education, allowing participants to redefine what empowerment looks like in their local context. Through this initiative, MASUM creates safe spaces for young girls to assert themselves, both on and off the court.

*Table 1: Maharashtra Labour Force Participation Rate for age 15 years and above, during period between 2017 and 2022 (Rural+Urban)<sup>4</sup>*

(in percentage)										
State	2017-2018		2018-2019		2019-2020		2020-2021		2021-2022	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
<b>Mahara shtra</b>	30.8	74.9	31.6	73.8	38.7	75.6	36.0	75.4	38.4	76.4

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI, (2022). (See bibliography)

Figure 3: Maharashtra labour force participation rate (LFPR), age 15 years and above, during the period between 2017 and 2022 (Rural+Urban) (self-created using MoSPI data).



## **CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

---

This chapter delineates the methodological framework and geographical setting of the dissertation, which investigates how education – as a pathway to empowerment – influences women's meaningful participation in leadership roles in the Pune district of Maharashtra. It identifies the key policy interventions needed to address educational disparities, promote gender equality, and create sustainable pathways for women to access leadership roles across all sectors. By examining multidimensional barriers and identifying effective interventions, this research will provide evidence-based recommendations for creating inclusive educational environments that support women's leadership, decision-making and overall empowerment.

The chapter begins by presenting the overall methodological approach that will guide this dissertation's analysis. It then reiterates the research question and then moves on to generate a theoretical expectation (hypotheses) based on existing literature. The chapter proceeds to outline the fieldwork strategy, detailing the rationale behind the selected qualitative methods: *field interviews and ethnographic observations* (Klotz & Prakash, 2008). Finally, it discusses the ethical considerations, positionality and methodological limitations encountered during the research process.

### **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

This dissertation adopts a comprehensive, mixed-method approach that investigates the relationship between access to education and leadership outcomes, considering the specific socio-cultural context. This research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the factors that shape women's empowerment and meaningful participation in leadership roles while identifying gaps in current education systems and policies. The mixed-methods approach combines extensive primary data collection through interviews and ethnographic observations. The primary data collected through in-depth field interviews with women from different backgrounds will provide valuable insights into the personal experiences, challenges and socio-cultural barriers they face in accessing education and participating in leadership roles, thus entering the labour market. Additionally, the ethnographic observations conducted during immersion in the local context complement the in-depth interviews by providing rich, descriptive data about human interactions and social practices. This approach is particularly well-suited for this dissertation, allowing to capture the complexity

of women's lived experiences and the diverse socio-cultural, geographic, and structural factors influencing the relationship between education and leadership in Maharashtra, with a focus on Pune district.

The dissertation's geographical choice of Maharashtra and specifically Pune is driven by its significance as a fast-developing state and city that encapsulates both urban and rural realities. Pune presents a varied landscape of challenges and opportunities shaped by disparities in educational and leadership access, as well as labour market conditions. Access to education is not only a fundamental human right but also a crucial factor in achieving socio-economic mobility (Kabeer, 2021). Education is widely considered the foundation of personal empowerment and frequently regarded as the gateway to leadership opportunities. However, in such a complex and stratified context, a critical question arises: *Is education alone sufficient for women to reach leadership roles?* By focusing on localised experiences and narratives, this study aims to unpack how women in Pune districts navigate education as a pathway to empowerment and how this in turn shapes their meaningful participation in leadership roles (Robino & Tebaldi, 2018, p. 6). In doing so, it also aims to shed light on the broader socio-cultural and structural factors that influence women's leadership trajectories at the local, regional, and even national levels.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

This study aims to answer one central question, along with three interrelated sub-questions that emerge from it. Firstly, the research seeks to answer the research question of: **How does access to education as a pathway to women's empowerment influence their meaningful participation in both formal and informal leadership roles in Pune district, Maharashtra?**

To unpack this overarching question, the dissertation is guided by three sub-questions:

- 1) *In what ways do socio-cultural factors, such as caste, class, and gender norms, shape women's access to education and opportunities in the labour market in Pune district?*
- 2) *How do rural and urban differences in educational infrastructure, social expectations, and labour conditions affect women's leadership trajectories?*
- 3) *Is education alone sufficient to empower women, or are targeted government policies and grassroots activism necessary to enable transformative change?*

Together, these questions aim to elucidate both structural barriers and individual narratives, offering a grounded perspective on the complex relationship between education, empowerment, and leadership in a localised Maharashtra context.

## **HYPOTHESES**

Although the existing literature offers limited established theories addressing both the impact of educational access on women's empowerment and meaningful participation in leadership roles in the Pune district in Maharashtra, a theoretical expectation (hypothesis) can be drawn based on existing literature and findings discussed in Chapter Two.

Therefore, the resulting hypothesis guiding the research is:

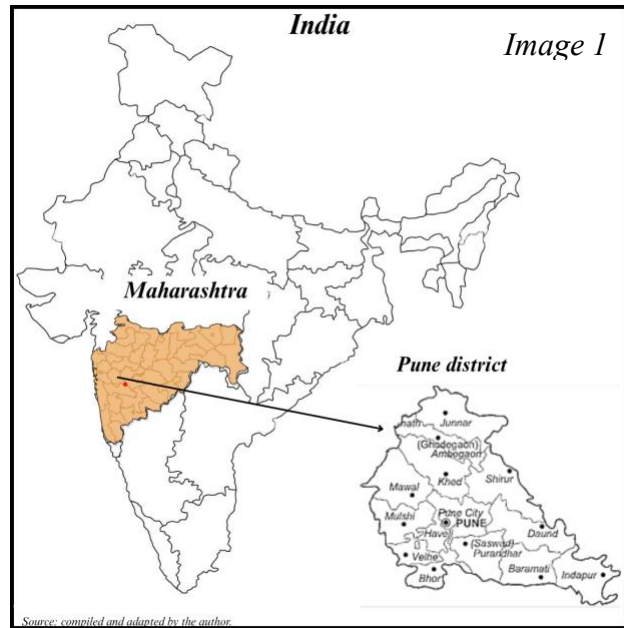
*Despite increasing access to education for women in the Pune district of Maharashtra, persistent structural barriers – such as caste hierarchies, entrenched gender norms, and socio-cultural expectations – continue to limit their ability to meaningfully enter, remain in, and progress within the labour market. Hence, even when women achieve education, they often face higher dropout rates from the workforce and limited access to leadership positions.*

Even among highly educated women, these multidimensional barriers often undermine the transformative potential of education, preventing it from fully translating into real empowerment and leadership opportunities. In both urban and rural contexts, qualified women may continue to face discrimination, exclusion from decision-making roles, and unequal labour market access. Therefore, while education is a critical enabler, it may not be sufficient on its own to overcome the multifaceted and intersecting barriers that shape women's lived experiences and constrain their full meaningful participation in leadership across sectors.



## FIELDWORK STRATEGY AND DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

This dissertation is grounded in two months of fieldwork, conducted in the Pune district of Maharashtra (See Image 1) between February and March 2025, during which I collaborated closely with the grassroots feminist organisation MASUM (Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal). This involved eight to ten hours daily of immersion in the organisation: collecting data through interviews, conversing with staff and volunteers, reviewing published materials, and observing training sessions and workshops. The decision to conduct in-person research was driven by the need to gain a deeper, contextualised understanding of how women in both rural and urban settings navigate access to education and leadership opportunities within a complex web of social, cultural, and institutional constraints. My collaboration with



MASUM enabled meaningful engagement with a diverse range of women, including staff, fellow youth program participants, students, local leaders and community members. Their perspective provided rich, firsthand, invaluable insights that I would not have collected otherwise. This field engagement was essential not only for collecting qualitative data through interviews and observations but also for building trust, capturing local dynamics and experiencing everyday realities that influence women's pathways to empowerment in this specific regional context. These interviews provide valuable insights into the current state of women's access to education and meaningful participation in leadership roles in the Pune district, offering a timely and up-to-date perspective on the issue.

### 1.1 Field Interviews

For the field interviews, I conducted twenty semi-structured individual interviews and two FGDs with a diverse range of stakeholders, including MASUM staff, participants in the education fellowship program, students in the sport empowerment program, local leaders and community members. Most of these interviews were held at the MASUM office, which served as a safe and accessible space for participants. This included interviews with staff members as well as some of the young women participating in the MASUM 'Education Fellowship Programme'. Additional

interviews with younger girls involved in the MASUM ‘*Empowerment Through Sport Programme*’ were conducted at their respective schools: Shivshambho Vidyalaya Khalad Secondary School in Kahald village (approximately 9 km from Saswad) and Dr Shankarrao Kolte Vidyalay & Jr College Secondary School in Pesarve village (approximately 18 km from Saswad). Furthermore, I chose to conduct two FGDs: one with two young girls from the Youth Program and the second one with four older women from Udachiwadi village (approximately 9 km from Saswad), located in the Purandar sub-district of Pune district, Maharashtra (*See Image 1 & Table 2*)<sup>5</sup>. The choice of employing two FGDs was made to highlight insights and understandings that individual interviews may not adequately capture, including “emotional and unconscious motivations” (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 173). Furthermore, the interactions within FGDs can reveal more information than they would reveal in a more formal interview setting. This was particularly evident in the second FGD, which was conducted in an open and safe space adjacent to the participants' houses.

*Table 2: Number of participants per geographic location<sup>6</sup>*

<b>Village or Town population (Population, rounded)</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Saswad Office (78,600)	12
Khalad Village (3,100)	2
Udachiwadi Village (900)	4
Pesarve Village (3,200)	2
Pune Office, Hadapsar area (250,000)	4
Total	24

<sup>5</sup> Image 2: FAVPNG.com. (n.d.). Maharashtra Indian General Election, 2014 India Today Living Media PNG. See bibliography.

<sup>6</sup> Source of population figures: Jalgaon District Census 2011 (Census Organization of India, 2011)

### 1.1.2 Sampling for Field Interviews

This dissertation focuses on understanding the experiences and challenges faced by women in the region in accessing education and attaining positions of leadership. All interview participants self-identified as women and have encountered many intersecting socio-cultural barriers. The participants of the field interviews and FGDs were selected with the help of the NGO following the purposive sampling method based on diverse socio-demographic characteristics like age, socio-economic background, and geographic location (urban vs. rural), with the aim of capturing a broad range of experiences and perspectives (Harris & Tuladhar, 2019) (Appendix 5). This intentional variety enhanced the representativeness of the sample within the specific context under study. This was also due to time and resource constraints, as the participants were selected based on their availability. The dissertation includes participants' ages ranging from 13 to 55 years. The majority of interviewees were aged between 13 and 29 years, as shown in *Table 3*.

For this study and the availability of the different stakeholders, I decided to establish six categories of women that I interviewed. These categories are **1) Rural Staff MASUM (Saswad), 2) Urban Staff MASUM (Hadapsar–Pune), 3) MASUM Education Fellowship Programme, 4) MASUM Empowerment Through Sport Programme, 5) ‘Yuva Manch’ Youth Platform / ‘Yuva Gat’ Youth Group, and 6) Village Women**. This categorisation is only used for analytical clarity and does not imply rigid or exclusive identities; the women interviewed often occupy multiple roles and have lived experiences that transcend these simplified labels (Appendix 6).

Following MASUM's guidelines and for clarity purposes, I have decided to refer to the local women from the Udachiwadi village where FGD2 was conducted as ‘village women,’ as they are not staff members of MASUM. This will be used throughout the entire report (Invally, Gupte, & Miwa, 2009).

*Table 3: Participants per age group*

Age Group	Range (years)	Number of Respondents
Adolescents	13–19	9
Young Adults	20–29	8
Adults	30–39	2
Middle-aged Adults	40 and above	4
Total	24	

After establishing certain stakeholders that I wanted to interview, all participants were identified by the focal point head of the MASUM rural office in Saswad, who oversaw assisting and directing me in the field interview collection. MASUM's local networks and contextual knowledge were essential in reaching individuals whose experiences reflected the complex realities of women's access to education and leadership in the Pune district. Respondents did not get remunerated for participating in the research. However, a small souvenir from my hometown was given to each respondent at the end of the interview as a thank-you gesture for their precious time (Invally, Gupte, & Miwa, 2009).

### *1.1.3 The Interview Questions*

To gather comprehensive insights, I developed three distinct sets of semi-structured interview questions, pre-approved by the organisation, tailored for: **1) for MASU's staff and women/girls in the Youth and Education Fellowship Programmes, 2) for the girls involved in the Empowerment Through Sport Programme, and 3) for the FGDs.** This allowed for context specific exploration while maintaining a consistent thematic focus.

Each interview began with a brief set of socio-demographic questions (age, gender, education, occupation, tenure, residence, marital status, and languages spoken). These questions, carefully chosen for cultural sensitivity with local partners and the interpreters and the interpreter, helped establish a relationship with participants, contextualise responses, and identify relevant patterns. The following five main sections explored key thematic areas: *a) Education and Empowerment, b) Leadership and Gender Roles, c) Caste, Class, and Cultural Norms, d) Policy and Systemic Barriers, and e) Cultural Resistance and Backlash.* Interviews concluded by inviting participants to share their *Vision for Change* and *Reflections* on personal experiences, providing valuable insights into their aspirations and self-assessments. This structured approach facilitated nuanced interpretation of the narratives and subsequent data visualisation (e.g., tables and graphs).

Throughout the entire fieldwork experience, I was accompanied by an external interpreter, recommended by MASUM for her local familiarity, previous experience with NGOs, and objectivity. She facilitated communication between English and Marathi/Hindi. Most interviews were conducted in Marathi to ensure participants were comfortable and at ease in explaining complex topics. We primarily used real-time interpretation of the interviews. However, due to the sensitive nature of certain questions, we adopted a hybrid approach where the interpreter document key notes in English during the interview, followed by a detailed debriefing session immediately

afterwards to ensure a comprehensive understanding. After fieldwork, the interpreter also supported the translation and transcription of recorded interviews into English. Nineteen out of twenty interviews, plus the two FGDs were audio-recorded using an iPhone and were treated with absolute confidentiality. The audio-recordings were then securely deleted after transcription.

Before each interview, I introduced myself, provided extensive information about the study, and addressed participants inquiries enquiries (often regarding revolved my age, educational attainment, marital status). After, all participants received and signed a consent form (Appendix 4) outlining the study's purpose, their rights, and permission for recording and photography, ensuring data confidentiality and adherence to ethical practices (See: *"Positionality and Ethical Considerations"*).

It is important to note that all interviewed women generally had a positive view of MASUM, as the sample excluded those with potentially challenging experiences or whom MASUM could not support. The limited but positive bias is visible in the findings, which largely portray the organization's efforts favourably. To provide a more balanced perspective, the discussion section includes some of the obstacles faced by MASUM, contributing to a constructive case study to the literature. These interviews aimed to uncover new evidence and capture a wide range of experiences on how education access shapes women's empowerment, labour market participation, and leadership roles, forming a critical component of the study's data collection and analytical framework. This provided contemporary, first-hand insights that would not have been possible otherwise.

Semi-structured interviews and FGDs are particularly well suited for this dissertation as they allowed open-ended, in-depth exploration of women's personal narratives, perceptions, and experiences with education and leadership (Halperin & Heath, 2020). This flexible format provided rich qualitative data on the challenges and opportunities, allowing for real-time questions adaptation and nuanced insights into women's socio-cultural and structural barriers. The insights gained from these interviews are critical to understanding local dynamics and informing policy recommendations for improving women's access to education and leadership pathways. While the limited number of interviews precludes statistically significant findings, the research prioritizes qualitative depth over quantity.

The interviews and ethnographic observations underwent thematic analysis using an inductive approach to identify recurring patterns and categories, aligning with the research

questions and incorporating both expected elements (e.g., caste barriers, gender norms) and emergent themes (see Chapter Six – Findings and Analysis).

## ***1.2 Ethnographic Observations***

Ethnographic observations complemented primary interview data, offering a deeper understanding of the social dynamics and everyday experiences shaping women's lives in Maharashtra and Pune (Halperin & Heath, 2020). It enabled opportunities for close interaction and collaboration with MASUM staff, program participants, students, and community members. Having previously lived in India, including a period of three years in Pune, facilitated re-engagement with the local environment and cultural nuances. This method allowed me to observe informal interactions, body language, and group dynamics that often remained unspoken in formal interviews. During interviews it's important to be active listeners not only of verbal comments but also of non-verbal cues like hesitations. This helped contextualise the participants' narratives within their lived environments.

Most observations took place during field visits to rural villages, community events, training sessions, school activities, and informal gatherings (Halperin & Heath, 2020). I took detailed notes to document their behaviours, routines, and social practices.

Incorporating ethnographic data served two key purposes: first, to capture and provide rich, descriptive data for interview responses within the broader socio-cultural landscape (Halperin & Heath, 2020); and second, to identify subtle and often implicit factors, like gender norms, power hierarchies, and communication styles, that shape women's empowerment pathways but may not be explicitly articulated. This firsthand experience contributed to the study's theoretical sensitivity and offered a more grounded understanding of the systemic barriers women face in accessing leadership roles (FitzGerald & Mills, 2022).

Due to ethical principles and privacy considerations, no audiovisual data was collected. Therefore, the observational data relies solely on my meticulous documentation through detailed field notes and subjective interpretations. I thoroughly documented my experiences at MASUM's Hadapsar and Saswad offices, interactions with villagers throughout prolonged days of dining and conversing, and discussions the interpreter, personnel and founders of MASUM. While this approach might have introduced potential biases or selective attention, this layered ethnographic approach enhances the dissertation's analytical depth and offers insight into how empowerment is

lived and enacted at the community level. This phenomenon is often overlooked in academic literature (Halperin & Heath, 2020).

## **RESEARCH LIMITATIONS**

Despite the strengths of the chosen mixed-method approach and the richness of field engagement, this dissertation presents several limitations that must be acknowledged.

### ***1. Language and Interpretation***

During the research phase, I encountered several challenges like the language barrier between the researcher (myself) and the participants. Most interviews were conducted in Marathi and with the help of an interpreter, which may have limited direct communication and possibly affected the flow of the conversations. Despite efforts to ensure accuracy through repeated cross-checks and follow-up clarifications, some nuances particularly cultural idioms or tone may have been lost in the process of translation, both simultaneous and post-fieldwork. This may have resulted in a subtle loss of nuance or misrepresentation of meaning (Klotz & Prakash, 2008). Nevertheless, the interpreter and the researcher – thanks to the audio recording of most interviews – were able to collaborate double checking unclear parts and making the translation as seamless as possible. Moreover, the interpreter's familiarity with the language and local context helped to create a comfortable environment for participants. Speaking in their mother tongue likely fostered greater openness, especially when discussing sensitive issues. It made them feel more comfortable, valued, and understood. Nevertheless, inherent limitations due to language barriers often pose a significant challenge in qualitative research involving cross-cultural and multilingual communication (Klotz & Prakash, 2008).

### ***2. Time and Sample Size Constraints***

Due to financial and time constraints, the fieldwork was conducted over a relatively brief period of two months. While this approach facilitated meaningful immersion, it is hypothesised that longer engagement would have led to more profound trust-building, a higher number of interviews, and further observation of evolving social dynamics, particularly in rural communities where interpersonal relationships evolve gradually over time. However, given the scope and word limit

constraints of this dissertation, a two-month fieldwork period still represents a substantial and valuable amount of time for in-depth qualitative research.

Moreover, the research is based on a relatively small sample of twenty semi-structured interviews, including two FGDs, and ethnographic observations. The participants were not randomly selected, as the NGO assisting with the fieldwork had to consider both their availabilities and the pre-established stakeholder selection. While this approach allows for in-depth context-specific insights into women's lived experiences of empowerment, it does not allow for statistically representative data. The voices captured are meaningful but may not reflect the full spectrum of experiences across caste, class, or geographic divides in India. However, I believe that a point of saturation had been reached after two months, twenty individual interviews, and two FGDs, meaning that this duration was still adequate. The exclusion of men from the interviews was a conscious decision based on time constraints and the focus of the study, though their perspective could have offered useful contrasts.

These limitations are important to consider when interpreting the findings but do not undermine the value of the data collected for understanding women's empowerment in this specific context.

## **POSITIONALITY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

As a qualitative fieldwork researcher in Maharashtra, reflecting on my positionality and upholding ethical practices was crucial<sup>7</sup>. Scholars like Phillips (2023) and Koltz & Prakash (2008) stress that researchers are not objective neutral observers; rather, they must position themselves within the study as they are situated within systems of knowledge, power, and privilege which shape both data interpretation and representation. Therefore, in this study, reflexivity was a continuous practice to ensure the credibility, confirmability, and transferability of the findings (Lim, 2025).

I position myself as a twenty-two-year-old Italian Master's student who spent part of her childhood in India and returned after ten years to conduct this research. While my familiarity with the local customs offered advantages in the field, my Western academic background and 'outsider' status in rural Maharashtra inevitably influenced my perceptions and interpretations. Despite efforts to minimise interference from these positions of privilege and potential biases, their

---

<sup>7</sup> I followed all ethical protocols and guidelines provided by the Geneva Graduate Institute and ensured full compliance at every stage of the research.



influence on the research process must be acknowledged when engaging with this work. I remained critically aware of socio-cultural dynamics and their interaction with my presence throughout the entirety of the fieldwork.

This dissertation focuses on sensitive topics of women's and girls' lived experiences regarding education, empowerment, employment, and the intersections of caste, class, and gender. Given the potential vulnerabilities of many participants, strict adherence to ethical principles and standards was paramount. Before every interview and FGD, informed consent (Appendix 4) both on paper and verbally was obtained, detailing the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any given time without consequences. Participants also provided permission for audio-recording and photos. All data has been anonymised, treated confidentially and will be discarded after thesis completion to protect identities and privacy of those involved. Interview questions were carefully designed in consultation with both my thesis supervisor and MASUM to avoid cultural or psychological insensitivity. Most interviews and FGDs took place in safe, comfortable environment chosen by the NGO and participants. An experienced and ethically trained interpreter external to MASUM, facilitated communication in Marathi, the participants' preferred language.

In line with my positionality, I approached the fieldwork with a feminist ethic of care, prioritising attentive listening and minimising researcher intrusion to honour participants' agency and dignity, not just to gather data. This chapter has therefore laid the groundwork for the upcoming analysis by outlining the research hypothesis, describing the methodologies, detailing interview selection, and elucidating the research's limitations, ethical considerations and my own positionality.

## CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS OF FIELD INTERVIEWS

---

This chapter presents and analyses the findings of this dissertation, drawing on the perspectives and lived experiences of diverse female stakeholders in the Pune district of Maharashtra. This study seeks to answer the central research question: **How does access to education as a pathway to women's empowerment influence their meaningful participation in both formal and informal leadership roles in Pune district, Maharashtra?** To explore this, the analysis is guided by three interrelated sub-questions focusing on the role of socio-cultural factors, rural-urban dynamics, and the sufficiency of education alone in driving transformative change. The findings are grounded in a mixed-methods approach combining insights from twenty semi-structured individual interviews, two FGDs, and in-depth ethnographic field notes. These data sources are used in conversation with one another to capture the complexity and intersectionality of women's empowerment and leadership journeys. The chapter is organised thematically in four parts, tracing how structural, social, and institutional factors interact with individual agency to shape women's access to education and labour force participation. After the thematic analysis, the chapter terminates on a critical reflection on the broader policy implications of the findings, with reference to educational reforms and grassroots strategies for transformative change.

### THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS<sup>8</sup>

This thematic analysis section identifies recurring patterns and key issues emerging from the twenty semi-structured individual interviews and two FGDs, conducted during fieldwork in collaboration with MASUM, across both urban (Pune City) and rural (Saswad, Purandar Tehsil) contexts in Maharashtra. Participants, including young women and girls involved in the MASUM '*Education Fellowship Programme*' and the '*Empowerment Through Sport Programme*' initiatives, MASUM staff members, and community stakeholders. The analysis process focuses on drawing out themes related to educational access and quality; aspirations and barriers to leadership; generated expectations; and the influence of caste and class on labour force participation. It is based on the questions asked during the interviews. This section unpacks these themes in four parts, each illustrating how participants' narratives reflect broader structural inequalities as well as localised forms of resistance and resilience. Finally, this section discusses the policy recommendations and

---

<sup>8</sup>All the interview passages included in this analysis are originally spoken in Marathi/Hindi and then carefully translated to English.

grassroots strategies shared by participants to address these challenges and foster meaningful, long-term change. The findings from the interviews are summarised in the table below:

*Table 4: Key findings from the interviews (actual table see Appendix 6)*

<b>Participant group</b>	<b>Key Barriers</b>	<b>Consequences</b>	<b>Opportunities/Recommendations</b>
MASUM Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Caste-based exclusion in schools</li> <li>- Lack of gender-sensitive pedagogy</li> <li>- Financial insecurity among families.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High dropout rates</li> <li>- Reinforcement of gendered roles</li> <li>- Early marriages due to financial pressures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Expand education fellowship programme to even more girls</li> <li>- Policy and advocacy for inclusive school environments</li> </ul>
MASUM Education Fellowship Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Domestic responsibilities limit study time</li> <li>- Parental pressure to marry</li> <li>- Poor transport/safety in rural areas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Disrupted education pathways</li> <li>- Mental health stress</li> <li>- Reduced employment options</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Peer mentorship and counselling</li> <li>- Increase of government Scholarships for girls</li> <li>- Gender-sensitive family engagement</li> </ul>
MASUM Empowerment Sport Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Resistance to girls' participation in public spaces</li> <li>- Gender stereotypes reinforced at school</li> <li>- Pressure to prioritize domestic chores or support family labour</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Poor confidence and self-image</li> <li>- No long-term educational planning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Empowerment through sports</li> <li>- Infrastructure (safe space for girls)</li> <li>- Life skills and leadership workshops</li> </ul>
Young Married Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Marriage pressure</li> <li>- Caste hierarchy</li> <li>- Social stigma</li> <li>- Lack of family support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Forced dropout rates</li> <li>- Loss of peer network</li> <li>- Emotional isolation</li> <li>- Reduced access to employment and leadership roles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Anti-child marriage campaigns</li> <li>- Bridge courses for re-entry into education post marriage.</li> <li>- Mentorship to support women in entering the labour market and leadership roles.</li> </ul>
Youth Programme Girls FGD 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gendered restriction on mobility and time use</li> <li>- Parental pressure to focus on domestic duties</li> <li>- Lack of awareness about non-traditional career paths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limited exposure to leadership or decision-making opportunities</li> <li>- Low confidence and self-expression</li> <li>- Education seen as secondary to family responsibilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Community workshop to build support for girls' aspirations</li> <li>- Expansion of structured youth engagement programmes</li> <li>- Creative platform to foster voice and agency</li> </ul>
Village Women FGD 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limited access to quality schooling</li> <li>- Discrimination based on caste</li> <li>- Lack of career guidance and role models</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Girls confined to unpaid care roles</li> <li>- Informal labour entry</li> <li>- Lack of aspiration building</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mobile career camp</li> <li>- Training for teachers on caste and gender sensitivity</li> <li>- Teacher's training to increase quality curriculum</li> </ul>

## 1. WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP

Access to education is essential for empowering women, especially in contexts where caste, class, gender, and geographic disparities converge. This first thematic section explores women's motivations for pursuing education and leadership roles, the perceived benefits of education in shaping not only their life trajectories but also their leadership pathways, and lastly, the different barriers they still face in accessing education. It also incorporates a focused analysis of how women understand, claim, and enact meaningful leadership roles in their communities and in the labour market. This section directly addresses the main research question of the dissertation and partially sub-question 2 (see section 1.4). It draws on all twenty individual interview participants and the FGDs, highlighting the different lived experiences between people living in urban and rural areas and emphasising the transformative role of grassroots initiatives like MASUM in creating pathways for both education and leadership.

### *1.1 Motivation for Education and Leadership Aspirations*

Many of the participants interviewed highlighted a deep personal desire for education, often inspired by their self-motivation and craving for freedom, personal development, and pride. Often, they also expressed their incentive to pursue education because they were inspired by role models, family members, teachers, or MASUM mentors. For instance, one participant recalled how her mother's struggle as a single parent and breadwinner after her father's accident fuelled her ambition: *"My mother had to discontinue her education due to marriage. She regrets not pursuing higher education and has made sure I don't face the same fate. She has been my rock and role model."* (Participant 3, age 19, personal communication, February 9, 2025).

Other young girls were driven by dreams of professional careers in law enforcement inspired by public figures like Kiran Bedi (the first woman in India to join the officer ranks of the Indian Police Service): *"From school, I was inspired by Kiran Bedi. I completed my education even after marriage, and now I plan to join the police academy."* (Participant 7, age 28, personal communication, February 20, 2025).

On several occasions, MASUM's *Education Fellowship Programme* provided not only financial support but also emotional encouragement. One interviewee explained: *"My mother faced many pressures to get me married, but she stood firm and supported my education."*

*MASUM's Education Fellowship made my dream of higher education possible.*" (Participant 2, age 19, personal communication, February 9, 2025).

Additionally, many young participants, especially the middle-school girls in the MASUM 'Empowerment Through Sport Programme', through which they have volleyball classes every week, are taught by a MASUM Staff woman who is also a coach. These girls linked education to future economic and emotional autonomy:

*As I continued to learn and play, I realised the numerous benefits volleyball offered. Not only did it improve my physical health, but it also boosted my confidence. Volleyball has become a powerful tool for me to express myself and speak up. I'm grateful for the opportunity to discover volleyball and explore its many benefits. It's amazing how sports can transform our lives and empower us to reach new heights.* (Participant 9, age 14, personal communication, February 12, 2025).

Lastly, several MASUM fellows were determined to "not be like their mothers," pushing against intergenerational illiteracy and early marriage. They aimed to disrupt the perpetuated cycles and obstacles.

## **1.2 Perceived Benefits of Education**

According to most the participants, schooling improved their empowerment, independence, self-assurance, and decision-making skills. In fact, they also connected education to having a "voice" in issues pertaining to the family and the community. Continuing education was frequently mentioned as a valid justification for marriage postponements. Moreover, despite its limitations in practice, the notion of education as a means of employment persisted. Through its *Education Fellowship Programme*, MASUM raised girls' civic and legal awareness and helped them comprehend their rights and responsibilities outside the home. One fellowship girl in her penultimate year of high school (11th std) stated: "*Education gave me the freedom to speak without fear... I can even guide my mother now.*" (Participant 11, age 16, personal communication, February 14, 2025).

Additionally, education served as a basis for both formal and informal leadership. Girls and women who had taken part in MASUM education programmes frequently served as campaign or event leaders in their communities: "*Initially I used anchoring at school events and organised*

*village programmes. This helped me to feel that I could lead by myself.* ”<sup>9</sup> (Participant 10, age 54, personal communication, February 14, 2025). Another girl who is part of the youth group ‘Yuva Manch Group,’ affirmed that *“It helped me step out there alone for the first time and express my thoughts in front of my family.”* (Participant 14, age 21, personal communication, February 20, 2025).

Education also made it possible to take on leadership roles in civic life and athletics. *Participant 1*, for instance, made a clear connection between her schooling and her leadership experience in volleyball and, subsequently, her participation in MASUM: *“Education gave me the opportunity to be involved with physical activity by playing volleyball and take on leadership roles like becoming team captain and then later, thanks to MASUM, become the coach. This positively impacted my life.”* (Participant 1, age 26, personal communication, February 5, 2025).

### 1.3 Barriers to Accessing Education

Despite strong motivations, women frequently encounter multiple barriers to education that often intersect and reinforce each other (*See Table 5*).

*Table 5: Barriers in accessing education (mentioned)*

Barrier	Rural (N)	Urban (N)	Common Illustrations
Financial Constraint	12	4	<i>“My mother pawned her Mangalustra to pay college fees.”</i> (Participant 3, age 19, personal communication, February 9, 2025)
Family/Societal pressure (early marriage)	9	2	<i>“Relatives said, ‘Why educate a girl? She’ll marry and leave.’”</i> (Participant 2, age 19, personal communication, February 9, 2025).
Lack of Infrastructure	8	1	<i>“I had to walk or ask strangers for lifts. It was scary.”</i> (Participant 7, age 28, personal communication, February 12, 2025).
Caste Discrimination	13	3	<i>“Caste plays a significant role in every aspect of life, including education.”</i> (Participant 24, age 28, personal communication, February 28, 2025).

<sup>9</sup> “anchoring” = present and coordinate.

Gendered Social norms (explored in 2.3)	10	1	<i>“In our society, girls are expected to help with chores, not study” – (Participant 12, age 23, personal communication, February 18, 2025).</i>
--	----	---	---

These obstacles were noticeably more severe in rural areas, where financial instability, patriarchal attitudes, and transportation issues all came together. Urban participants nevertheless had to deal with cultural expectations, especially after marriage or motherhood, even if they were often more supported.

#### *a. Financial Constraints*

One of the most common obstacles was financial difficulties. Numerous participants stated that they or their families were unable to pay for further education, which frequently forced them to make sacrifices in their professional decisions. The burden of higher education expenses was cited as a key reason for early dropout or limited enrolment in affordable programmes that did not align with the individual's true interests: *“My dream of becoming a police officer remained unfulfilled because it was too expensive. I had to settle for more affordable education, like a Bachelor of Arts.”* (Participant 1, age 26, personal communication, February 5, 2025).

Another girl, a participant in the MASUM fellowship programme, stated: *“My sister had to get out of school because of our family's economic struggles, and she ended up getting married.”* (Participant 13, age 20, personal communication, February 18, 2025).

Additionally, another participant who is now a MASUM psychology counsellor for domestic violence victims added: *“I felt the financial limitations because both my parents were farmers, and the farm did not bring in enough money to support everyone's education.”* - (Participant 17, age 35, personal communication, February 14, 2025).

In light of these findings, it is clear that financial limitations persisted in urban areas. However, some of these financial barriers were often somewhat mitigated by GoM's grants, MASUM or family savings. Nonetheless, because there were fewer institutions, long commutes, and more social pressure, rural women experienced more exacerbated consequences.

This barrier can be linked to another underlying barrier regarding the lack of access to timely and accurate information regarding government programmes, scholarships, and educational efforts. This was cited as a major obstacle for many women and young girls in school in several

interviews. Despite the existence of such initiatives, they frequently fall short of reaching the rural populations that require them the most. Deadlines may have passed, or the process may feel too daunting for rural families when they learn about an opportunity due to a lack of advice, complicated bureaucratic procedures, and delayed communication. One girl who is the leader of the 'Yuva Manch' youth group programme in the village explained: *"Most of the time, we manage to find out about government schemes only after the deadline has passed. "What is the use, then?"* (Participant 12, age 23, personal communication, February 18, 2025).

However, MASUM's presence and efforts have been crucial in closing this gap in the Saswad area. Participants mentioned that in addition to offering helpful information about relevant programmes, MASUM also offers practical support, like helping complete application forms (e.g., opening bank accounts), locating necessary paperwork, and overcoming bureaucratic hurdles. By ensuring that public efforts truly reach, and benefit marginalised rural girls and women, MASUM enhances the role of the state. One girl from the fellowship programme who is now pursuing a Bachelor of Commerce (B. Comm) emphasised, *"Without MASUM, many women wouldn't have known what forms to fill or what documents to gather to open an individual bank account."* (Participant 13, age 19, personal communication, February 18, 2025).

This demonstrates how, despite their necessity, GoM's actions are frequently insufficient on their own. The existence of local NGOs that serve as access facilitators and mediators is often essential to the successful implementation of such initiatives in rural areas.

#### *b. Social Norms, Family Expectations, and Domestic Control*

In many of the interviews conducted, it was clear that the expectations of family and the surrounding society regarding early marriage and household responsibilities greatly influenced the educational paths taken by several women and young girls. Jayachandran's (2021) research on societal norms as an impediment to women's employment in developing nations offers a vital framework for comprehending these obstacles. These expectations often translated into tangible restrictions on mobility, career choices, or access to further education: *"Society expects girls to get married after 12th standard, the last year of high school. Education is seen as a waste."* (Participant 11, age 16, personal communication, February 14, 2025). Another girl added that she often heard people from her village say, *"Why educate a girl? She'll just get married and leave."* (Participant 2, age 19, personal communication, February 9, 2025).



Although some families resisted these norms by allowing their daughters to pursue education, recognising the importance of challenging traditional beliefs and social structures, they still imposed restrictions, such as requiring them to choose "safer" options and more affordable courses. Others reinforced them strictly. For instance, one participant described how her family supported her ambitions, reflecting a slow change in perceptions in some rural areas:

*My parents were always really very supportive. My father helped me with my ambition of joining the Police academy. My parents taught us to make our own decisions by ourselves. So yes, I was my own decision-maker since my school time. However, for a while my father was getting a little upset because of my choice of having a love marriage. (Participant 7, age 28, personal communication, February 12, 2025).*

However, this support was far from universal. More concerning were testimonies revealing how deeply domestic control and the threat of violence impacted girls' ability to pursue their goals. For some, the fear of replicating the abuse they had witnessed growing up was enough to make education feel like the only possible escape, yet an uncertain one. One participant had the immense courage of openly sharing her fears:

*At that time, I was afraid of getting married because I knew that my parents would arrange a marriage for me, and I would have to face the same kind of violence that I had witnessed in my childhood. I was scared that my future husband would abuse me, and my children would have to witness the same kind of violence. (Participant 23, age 22, personal communication, February 24, 2025).*

This quote demonstrates that patriarchal dominance not only restricts educational opportunities but also inflicts emotional distress and trauma on women from a young age. In these specific environments, education becomes a form of survival, not only empowerment.

These lived realities show that for many girls, family expectations are profoundly intertwined with fear, silence, and coercion. On the other hand, education, while valuable, is often conditional and secondary to preserving "honour" or fulfilling traditional gender roles. Therefore, empowerment initiatives must not only broaden school access but also tackle the ingrained structural violence and psychological burdens that persistently shape women's lives in private.

*c. Infrastructure and Accessibility*

Many participants found that accessibility and infrastructure were major barriers to pursuing education, especially those from remote areas. A common problem that surfaced was the difficulty of safe transportation, particularly for young girls from isolated communities. Students were exposed to physical exhaustion and safety hazards because schools and colleges were frequently placed far from their homes and there was no dependable public transportation, forcing them to travel long distances or rely on strangers for rides. One of the MASUM staff women remembered her school time as a young girl and stated that: *“During my school time, there were no buses. I had to rely on strangers for lifts; some asked inappropriate questions.”* (Participant 4, age 28, personal communication, February 10, 2025). Moreover, one of the girls from the ‘Yuva Manch’ youth programme said, *“We (my family) shifted to Saswad centre because there was no school beyond 10th in our village.”* (Participant 12, age 21, personal communication, February 18, 2025).

To guarantee access to education beyond high school, families were frequently compelled to move to peri-urban areas like Saswad, which put further financial and social hardship on households, especially because in India they usually have considerably bigger families.

A different picture was painted by the metropolitan setting, especially in places like Pune. The availability of numerous educational institutions and more advanced transportation networks made physical access to them less difficult. But the cost of tuition, transportation expenses, traffic, and private transportation (such as buses or rickshaws) continued to be constraining, particularly for families with lower incomes.

The COVID-19 epidemic further exacerbated the perilous situation. Participants recalled how entire villages were essentially cut off from neighbouring towns when public transport came to a halt. Many young women were compelled to halt or discontinue their education as a result of schools and institutions being shuttered or inaccessible, while most rural households lacked digital equipment, stable internet connectivity, and electricity, making digital learning an unfeasible alternative. One of the fellowship girls who is now terminating her bachelor's in nursing (BSc Nursing) in Pune city centre claimed:

*The lack of infrastructure, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, also hindered my education. With online classes, I struggled with a small mobile phone, wasting precious time. Again, my mother came to the rescue, pawning her Mangalsutra to buy a bigger*

*Android mobile phone, ensuring I could continue my studies uninterrupted.* (Participant 3, age 19, personal communication, February 9, 2025).

Another woman part of the Saswad office staff confirmed this thought, as she also faced some issues:

*During my school time, buses were available, but after the COVID-19 lockdown, the bus crisis happened. I managed to complete my education before Covid, so infrastructure did not heavily bother me, but I know for many girls it was a big issue.* (Participant 4, age 28, personal communication, February 10, 2025).

This draws attention to a crucial infrastructure deficit that extends beyond simple geographic separation. Disasters like pandemics, which disproportionately impact rural students, particularly females, who are more likely to be permanently relegated to household duties, must be taken into consideration while developing resilience plans for educational continuity.

#### ***1.4 Leadership: Practices and Aspirations***

In addition to the existing literature discussed in earlier chapters, which explores the relationship between women's empowerment, education, and pathways to employment and leadership, the interview data provides compelling qualitative evidence of how these dynamics unfold in practice. Many participants affirmed that leadership is deeply intertwined with education, community engagement, and personal growth. This was especially evident among rural women, who described taking both informal and formal leadership roles, not only as an extension of their education journeys but also as a meaningful form of employment and community responsibility.

Nevertheless, one of the most significant illustrations of the intricacies of women's leadership in India is evident in the domain of local governance in rural areas. Within the state of Maharashtra, women are constitutionally guaranteed 50 per cent reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), encompassing Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, and Zilla Parishads (Kumar, 2024)<sup>10</sup>. While this quota has led to a substantial increase in formal representation of women, the reality on the ground often falls short of genuine empowerment.

---

<sup>10</sup> "Gram panchayat" translates to "village union" or "village association" and refers to a community-based organisation or group at the village level that is often focused on development, welfare, or self-governance.

The findings, based on both participant observations and broader fieldwork, have highlighted the phenomenon of women being elected to leadership roles, such as Sarpanch (head of the village council), yet functioning primarily as figureheads. It is a common occurrence for the decision-making authority to be retained by the husband, son, or other male relatives. The women interviewed in the FGD2 from the Udachiwadi village made the following observation:

*Women now have 50 per cent reservation in various sectors, including politics and education. This has not only increased their participation but also given them a voice and recognition. Unfortunately, in some places, when a woman gets elected as a Sarpanch, she will be the symbolic figure, but the decision-making power is in the hands of her husband or son, and people refer to him as the Sarpanch instead.* (Participants 18-21 FGD2, ages 40-45, personal communication, February 22, 2025).

This dynamic underscores how patriarchy continues to operate even within structures designed to promote gender equality. In certain instances, male relatives have been known to assume an openly managerial role in the governance of the village; one woman from the second FGD, who works in the Gram Panchayat, told us that she once heard the husband of the Sarpanch figure say, *"I handle the village decision matters. We only call her for her signature."* (Participants 18-21 FGD2, ages 40-45, personal communication, February 22, 2025).

This quotation captures the long-held view that men should still have actual power and that women's election is merely symbolic. Despite constitutional efforts to decentralise power and promote "Gram Swaraj" (village self-governance), a vision advocated by Mahatma Gandhi, women's autonomy in governance remains constrained by entrenched gender norms.

In addition, women, particularly in rural regions, frequently characterise leadership as a type of community-based responsibility, as opposed to formal authority. This relational and action-orientated view of leadership often goes unrecognised in formal structures, but it demonstrates women's active roles in shaping their communities.

Others, particularly those involved with MASUM's education and youth programmes, began to self-identify as leaders through mentorship and increased visibility: *"Now I help younger girls in my community navigate school and public spaces."* (Participants 15-16 FGD1, age 19, personal communication, February 20, 2025).

### ***1.5 Barriers in Accessing the Labour Market and Leadership Positions***

One of the main forces behind economic growth has been identified as female FLFP (Verick, 2014). However, there is a complicated relationship between women's labour market participation and more general developmental outcomes. In comparison to men, FLFP varies far more. Less than one-third of working-age women in South Asia participate in the labour force (Verick, 2014). According to Verick (2014), this “variation is driven by a wide variety of economic and social factors, including economic growth, increased educational attainment, falling fertility rates, and persistent social norms” (p. 1).

The ILO *India Employment Report 2024* outlines current developments in the Indian labour market, pointing out both advancements and enduring or emerging difficulties. Between 2000 and until 2019, key labour market indicators showed a long-term decline, but after that year and after the COVID-19 pandemic, they improved. According to the report, the labour force participation rate (LFPR) is one example of this. From 2000 to 2019, India experienced a substantial decline in its overall LFPR (ILO, 2024). This decline was primarily attributable to a significant decrease in female participation, particularly within rural areas. However, this trend underwent a reversal between 2019 and 2022, with the overall LFPR rising to 55.2 per cent, driven by an 8.3 percentage point increase in the female LFPR, most notably in rural regions (ILO, 2024). This positive momentum persisted into 2023, with the LFPR reaching 57.9 per cent, primarily attributable to a 4.2 percentage point increase in women's participation (ILO, 2024). The rise observed among rural women was especially pronounced, resulting in a further narrowing of the gender gap in labour market participation. Despite these gains, the female LFPR remains low, at 32.8 per cent in 2023, significantly below the global average of 47.3 per cent, and still more than twice as low as the male LFPR of 77.2 per cent, reflecting persistent gender inequality (ILO, 2024; World Bank Group, 2024b).

Participants' interviews in this dissertation indicate societal and structural hurdles that “prevent women from entering the workforce” and holding leadership roles, which is consistent with national data (Vishwakarma & Gupta, 2024, p. 89). These include caste-based exclusion, gender bias, lack of support systems, domestic duties, and educational disparities. The following table provides an overview of the main perceived obstacles brought up throughout the interviews:

*Table 6: Short version – Main barriers women face in accessing labour market and leadership positions (all these barriers are interlinked and not mutually exclusive). Complete version in Appendix 7.*

<b>Barrier</b>	<b>Participants (N)</b>
Caste-based discrimination	<b>21</b>
Gender Bias	<b>18</b>
Lack of role-models	<b>13</b>
Work-life balance issues	<b>12</b>
Educational gaps	<b>11</b>
Lack of networking opportunities	<b>10</b>
Other (social pressure, low self-esteem, male domination of symbolic roles)	<b>6</b>

This table (*Table 6*) underscores the pervasive influence of social norms and systemic inequalities in perpetuating barriers that impede women's full integration into the workforce and leadership roles. The frequency with which caste-based discrimination and gender bias were mentioned underscores the intersectional nature of these challenges, where identity markers such as caste, class, and gender compound women's marginalisation. It is noteworthy that the absence of role models and networking prospects indicates that even when women successfully overcome initial educational and societal barriers, they encounter a scarcity of institutional and interpersonal support necessary to maintain leadership trajectories. Furthermore, the disproportionate distribution of unpaid domestic labour and caregiving responsibilities continues to impose significant constraints on women, thereby limiting their capacity for professional engagement. These findings underscore the necessity for holistic, context-sensitive approaches that concurrently address cultural perceptions, structural constraints, and policy gaps to establish more equitable pathways to leadership.

Participants from lower castes or marginalised communities often reported being excluded from village decision-making spaces or dismissed despite their qualifications: *"Even when educated, women from lower castes are not respected or heard."* (Participant 3, age 19, personal communication, February 9, 2025). A girl from the youth programme mentioned that she often

observed in her community that: *"Women don't often speak up in rural village meetings. Men often do the talking and decision-making."* (Participant 14, age 21, personal communication, February 20, 2025).

These testimonies reveal how intersecting oppressions related to caste and gender constrain women's ability to lead. One of the Saswad office staff members clarified, *"During my work in the field with MASUM, I've sometimes encountered resistance and unacceptance from some men from the villages."* (Participant 4, age 28, personal communication, February 10, 2025).

Nevertheless, exposure to rights-based frameworks and encouragement through the NGO proved transformative: *"MASUM gave me courage to speak about women's rights."* (Participant 22, age 31, personal communication, February 24, 2025). This demonstrates how feminist organisations can play a critical role in legitimising and nurturing women's leadership by creating spaces for voice, validation, and collective learning.

### ***1.6 Urban vs Rural: Education as Pathway to Empowerment***

This segment directly addresses sub-question 2) **How do rural and urban differences in educational infrastructure, social expectations, and labour conditions affect women's leadership trajectories?** (more in detail in point 2.4 of the analysis). The gap between urban and rural areas greatly influences the experiences of women. Although urban *Participants like 4, 22, 23, and 24* still had to deal with social expectations surrounding marriage and childbirth, they generally had greater access to infrastructure and fewer transportation-related problems. On the other hand, issues like access to schools, unsafe transportation, and ingrained gender norms presented difficulties for rural women. One participant who is an active leader of the youth programme revealed:

*In rural areas, formal education systems are more widespread than before, but they are still often ineffective. This is due to a lack of resources, trained personnel, and proper infrastructure like computer rooms, innovative tools, physical education (P.E.) gyms, etc., in schools. As a result, girls in these areas continue to face significant constraints and lack proper education and empowerment."* (Participant 14, age 21, personal communication, February 20, 2025).

Another girl from the fellowship programme added:

*I've witnessed firsthand the disparity in education between urban and rural areas. During my visits to villages for surveys with MASUM, I met a teacher who told me that girls in those areas are not allowed to pursue education beyond 7th or 8th standard, and even if they do, they are married off soon after. The girls are not encouraged to pursue careers or higher education. (Participant 13, age 20, personal communication, February 18, 2025).*

The two girls from the FGD1 both expressed a strong urge to point out that: “*Girls in these rural areas are often denied the opportunity to pursue their dreams.*” (Participants 15-16 FGD1, age 19, personal communication, February 20, 2025). Similarly, Participant 14 had a clear vision of why this happens and explained that:

*In my experience there is a big difference in the way education is perceived and implemented in urban and rural areas. While cities have a higher level of awareness and access to resources, rural areas continue to struggle with basic infrastructure and mindset shifts. (Participant 14, age 21, personal communication, February 20, 2025).*

However, in both contexts, MASUM was essential in facilitating further education by providing funding, mentoring, and exposure to feminist principles through youth clubs and fellowships.

## **2. SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS SHAPING WOMEN'S EDUCATION, LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP ASPIRATIONS**

This second thematic section explores how socio-cultural factors, particularly caste, class, gender norms, and familial or community attitudes, shape women's daily lives, educational trajectories, LFPR, and leadership pathways in Pune district. It directly addresses sub-question 1) **In what ways do socio-cultural factors such as caste, class, and gender norms shape women's access to education and opportunities in the labour market in Pune district?** Drawing on qualitative data, this section highlights the complex interplay of these socio-cultural dimensions and the ways in which they interact to either support or restrict women's involvement in official and informal leadership positions. According to many findings from the interviews, it is critical to address the ongoing obstacles that women from under-represented castes and socioeconomic backgrounds experience, highlighting the significance of advancing equity and inclusivity in both the workplace and in educational institutions.



## ***2.1 Caste as a Determinant of Educational Access and Leadership Pathways***

For many women, caste was and, on many occasions, still is a pervasive obstacle to leadership and education. As previously explained in the literature section, the caste system in India is arguably the longest enduring social hierarchy globally (Human Rights Watch, 2001). It is a fundamental aspect of Hinduism, and it involves an intricate ordering of social groups determined by ritual purity (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Caste is a form of social stratification based on a hereditary system, determined by birth, with fixed social status and occupation, and often associated with ritual purity and pollution. One of the women participants remarked:

*Caste plays an important role in limiting women's access to education and leadership opportunities. I am from OBC, so not from the lower castes, such as ST or SC; however, I have observed that people from those castes face discrimination and are often denied opportunities.*” (Participant 1, age 26, personal communication, February 5, 2025).

Multiple other women interviewed described how caste discrimination does not only limit access to schooling but also hinders participation in community forums or local governance initiatives. A MASUM staff member shared:

*It is hard for people from low castes to get an education, and when they do manage, they are not capable of accessing proper employment, and authorities and people in higher positions do not want them at their level, so they keep suppressing them.* (Participant 11, age 16, personal communication, February 14, 2025).

In addition to being a social category, caste also functions as a gatekeeping system that stifles creativity and ambition, as this illustrates. Here, intersectionality is essential. Lower-caste women, for example, frequently experience double disadvantages, including exclusion based on caste and their gender control by patriarchy. As a SC village woman noted in the FGD2: *“Our husbands go to the city. We stay back and do the work, but we are not called leaders for it”* (Participants 18-21 FGD2, age 40-45, personal communication, February 22, 2025).

Nevertheless, inside the family or community, informal leadership is occasionally acknowledged. One woman described organising a street show in several villages for a women's health awareness campaign, stating: *“They come to me for help because I am not afraid to speak out and show my actions in front of people. But I don't call myself a leader, just someone who knows how to get work done.”* (Participant 17, age 35, personal communication, February 14, 2025).

This suggests that leadership is understood more relationally and collectively, particularly by women from under-represented castes, not as a formal position of power but rather as a series of acts based on mutual trust and benefit.

Importantly, different participants had different descriptions of caste oppression. Caste-based discrimination was no longer common in their village thanks to MASUM's constant efforts, according to a group of women who participated in the FGD:

*We have not experienced caste discrimination in our village, and if it existed in the past, it has now stopped. There is no caste discrimination of any kind here – it may happen to a very small extent, but not in the fully traditional way. Our village has become more open-minded, also thanks to MASUM's work on awareness. (Participants 18-21 FGD2, age 40-45, personal communication, February 22, 2025).*

Similarly, although caste is still a major obstacle in every aspect of Indian life, particularly for women, there are numerous gains being made, and people's perspectives, also in rural areas, are gradually changing, according to a young MASUM staff member of the health programme: *“Despite caste discrimination still being very present, especially in rural parts of the country, things are slowly changing because people's perceptions are slowly shifting and becoming more flexible.” (Participant 7, age 28, personal communication, February 12, 2025).*

Adding to this reflection, a long-time MASUM staff member emphasised the interlinkage of caste and class in shaping women's lives:

*Caste overall puts a lot of restrictions and challenges on women because both systems of operation work there, with the nexus of caste and class in India very prevalent. Discrimination present, lack of respect. Untouchability is now illegal and considered as not present on paper, but in a few villages and remote areas it still exists. (Participant 22, age 31, personal communication, February 24, 2025).*

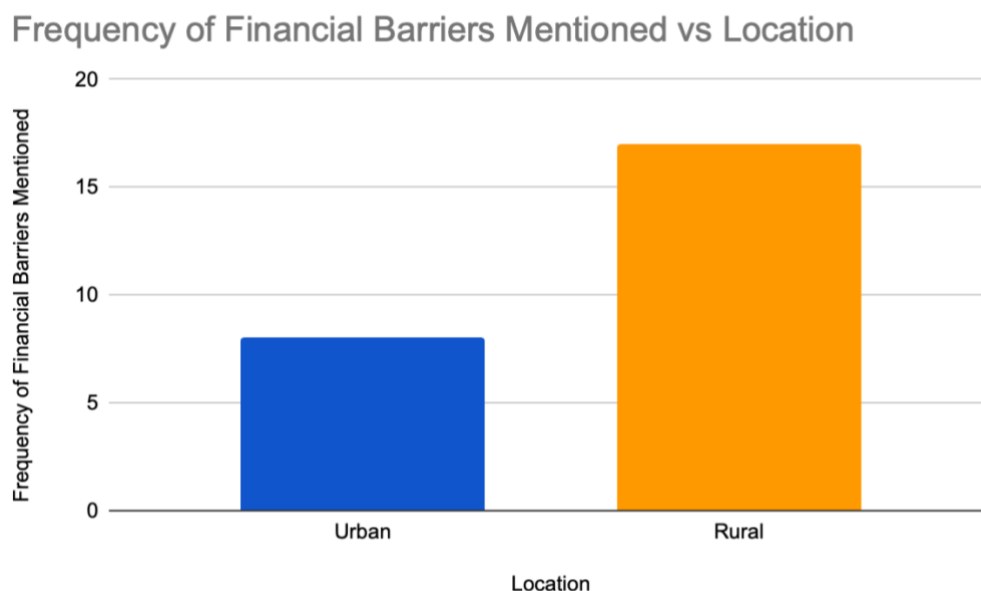
Despite efforts to challenge and change these attitudes, they remain entrenched and continue to perpetrate inequality and injustice. When combined, these voices show how caste continues to impose institutional hurdles but also how grassroots initiatives and slowly changing attitudes are starting to undermine these long-standing conventions.

## 2.2 Class, Economic Status and LFPR

Compared to caste, the class of a person is based on multiple economic factors like economic wealth, income and occupation, as well as power and achievements. Nonetheless, caste and class frequently coexist, with caste-based inequalities reinforcing class-based economic disparities. Therefore, many interviewees frequently discussed financial difficulty in their family, which was frequently linked to caste. Numerous women stated that they were unable to pay tuition or afford transportation, which caused them to leave or take a break from education as well as constrained their employability. A woman from the rural villages stated: *“My brother’s school fees were always paid, even if we had to borrow money. But for me, they said, enough now, help your mother on the farm”* (Participant 4, age 28, personal communication, February 10, 2025).

The graph (*Figure 4*) below compares participants' remarks of financial barriers in rural and urban settings, showing that this gendered resource distribution was more noticeable in rural areas:

*Figure 4: Frequency of financial barriers mentioned vs location*



Looking at this graph it is demonstrated that there are seventeen rural respondents that mentioned financial barriers compared to eight mentions by urban respondents. This highlights a clear disparity that suggests that financial obstacles limiting rural women's access to education and employment opportunities were more commonly mentioned.

Participants in urban areas still mentioned financial challenges, but they also expressed comparatively greater support for ongoing education. One staff member from the MASUM office

in Pune (urban) noted: *"We didn't have a lot, but my mother always said I should study more than her. So, she worked double shifts for my fees."* (Participant 22, age 31, personal communication, February 24, 2025).

These stories not only demonstrate class mobility aspirations, where education is seen as a means and pathway to get out of poverty, but also that the continuing burden of economic precarity still disproportionately affects women's opportunities. Financial hardship was often exacerbated by gendered expectations that saw education for girls as secondary compared to their male counterparts. However, most participants still expressed a strong belief in education's transformative power for advancing gender equality: *"We believe that women's education and leadership are crucial for creating a more equal and just society."* (Participants 15-16 FGD1, age 19, personal communication, February 20, 2025).

Beyond education, social norms and class continued to influence women's LFPR, which was still unequal. Women from lower-income households often reported that their autonomy was limited by their financial reliance on their husbands or in-laws. Others mentioned that they had to put paid work ahead of voluntary leadership positions, limiting their participation in community initiatives or representative positions: *"When it comes to women's education and leadership, women are often not given the opportunity to pursue their goals. They are expected to be secondary to men and are often confined to domestic roles, such as cooking and childcare."* (Participant 2, age 19, personal communication, February 9, 2025).

Even working women reported that male household members continued to control their earnings, demonstrating the persistence of this financial dependence: *"Women's economic dependence is evident, especially in rural areas. This is because women are financially dependent on their family members. Even if they work, the men in the household decide how their earnings are used."* (Participants 15-16 FGD1, age 19, personal communication, February 20, 2025). These dynamics show that, particularly in rural and marginalised households, having access to income does not always translate into having decision-making authority or financial independence.

Another notable example of these structural disparities is the persistent difference in wages between men and women actively participating in the workforce in the same way. One interviewee shared: *"There was a woman living near me, from a lower caste, who used to work as a farmer in the fields. Despite her hard work, the landowner paid her very low wages, lower than the men workers."* (Participant 3, age 19, personal communication, February 9, 2025).

This statement highlights how caste and class both have an impact on how well women participate in the workforce, especially in rural informal sectors where work is frequently underpaid and unprotected. Others considered the difficulties women encounter when they move from education to entering the labour market through employment as a result of social constraints and constrictive gender norms:

*In general, in Maharashtra, women going to school to get educated is very much normalised now, but there are many differences from big cities to small villages and towns. The main difference is after school, when a woman has to find a job to put into practice what she learnt. Women are not encouraged to stay unmarried. Hard to pursue a job after education because house duties come first. I have seen this in my family with my mom, who had to get married right after studies.* – (Participant 22, age 31, personal communication, February 24, 2025).

This demonstrates how, despite the growing acceptance of education, conventional expectations about marriage, mobility, and gender roles continue to influence women's access to the job market, particularly in smaller towns and rural areas. Despite these limitations, a lot of participants stressed the importance of education as a basis for leadership and social change, in addition to its worth for personal growth. After obtaining an education, women and girls frequently acquire leadership abilities, self-assurance, and the capacity to motivate others, all of which help to create a society that is more inclusive and egalitarian. The interviews highlight the interconnectedness of education and leadership. As women and girls gain access to education, they develop the skills, abilities, and information necessary to meaningfully participate in the labour force and take on leadership roles, creating positive change. One girl confirmed: *“I believe that if women and girls gain access to education, they can get the skills, confidence, and knowledge they need to take on leadership roles and create positive change.”* – (Participant 15-16 11, age 16, personal communication, February 14, 2025).

### ***2.3 Gender Norms and Social Expectations***

Gendered expectations, especially around marriage, mobility and domestic duties, emerged as perhaps the most persistent and deeply entrenched constraint across the interviews. These expectations frequently dictate whether or not women and young girls can finish their education, engage in public life, or pursue leadership positions. For instance, when asked whether they had faced any challenges like family expectations or societal norms in participating in MASUM's

Education programmes, such as the *Fellowship and Empowerment Through Sport Programme*. Two girls from the volleyball school team stated:

*When I first started playing volleyball, my parents were hesitant. They prioritised my studies, worrying that sports would distract me. My mother, in particular, was concerned about my commitment to education. However, after persistent requests, my family finally allowed me to play. As they saw my passion and talent for volleyball, they became more supportive.* (Participant 8, age 14, personal communication, February 12, 2025).

*My parents' primary expectation of me is to focus on education, and they initially discouraged me from pursuing volleyball. They would tell me, 'You can't learn anything; don't waste your time on sports.' However, I explained to them that I can manage both sports and education. I explained to them the benefits of playing volleyball, such as improved discipline, teamwork, and time management skills.* – (Participant 9, age 14, personal communication, February 12, 2025).

These reflections highlight how these girls had to negotiate with their families to push beyond the boundaries imposed by traditional gender roles. The household's perceptions gradually changed because of this negotiation. A girl added that: *“After gaining my family's approval, societal interference ceased. By challenging traditional expectations, I demonstrated that pursuing sports and academics simultaneously is achievable.”* (Participant 6, age 13, personal communication, February 10, 2025).

Others experienced more social pressure than outright opposition from their families: *“When we started playing volleyball, people would say, ‘Isn't she ashamed to wear such short clothes’, they'd think, ‘if she does this, our own daughters will also behave like this.’ I observed it with other friends too.”* – (Participant 5, age 13, personal communication, February 10, 2025).

These stories demonstrate resistance and resilience. Girls used reasoning, persistence, and performance to gradually shift family attitudes and perceptions, frequently with long-lasting effects. Another girl talked about how social expectations from the wider community exerted pressure on her family decisions, especially around marriage, in ways that threatened to derail her educational and career aspirations. She stated: *“My community tried to discourage me from pursuing my education, sending marriage proposals to my parents and spreading rumours about my character.”* (Participant 3, age 19, personal communication, February 9, 2025).

This illustrates the ways in which moral policing and behaviour monitoring of young women, particularly in rural areas, are employed to uphold gender norms and restrict mobility. Nonetheless, the narrative of this participant also emphasises how crucial family support was in fending off social pressure. One girl proudly said: *"My mother remained unfazed. Her unwavering support has been my strength. She's determined to provide me with all education, even if it means I have to stay far away from the village or live in a hostel."* (Participant 3, age 19, personal communication, February 9, 2025).

Her story emphasises how acts of resistance by individuals and families can create new paths, even though traditional expectations regarding women's roles are still quite strong. It also demonstrates that being a leader is not only about holding official positions; it can also be demonstrated by having the guts to stand up for others as well as oneself. Her mother's *"selfless encouragement has empowered me to stay focused on my goals, despite the community's unsupportive attitude"*, as this young woman put it (Participant 12, age 23, personal communication, February 18, 2025). However, several participants noted that gender discrimination often cuts across caste lines and intersects different elements together. One woman observed:

*If a woman belongs to a higher caste, she is treated with more respect and dignity. However, as a woman, her abilities are always questioned. Her caste matters, but her gender matters even more. Especially if she is a woman from a marginalised community, such as an ST, she is given fewer opportunities than a woman from a higher caste and even fewer than a man from the same marginalised group.* (Participant 24, age 28, personal communication, February 28, 2025).

This remark emphasises that especially in rural areas, deeply ingrained gender norms not only persist as a barrier regardless of caste identity. However, when a woman also comes from a lower caste or marginalised group, she is destined to face a double burden: the combined weight of caste and gender-based discrimination. This highlights how entrenched patriarchy continues to constrain women's opportunities, even among those who may hold some degree of caste privilege.

Additionally, even when young girls and women succeed in pursuing higher levels of education, its purpose is often framed within the context of marriageability rather than as a right or tool for self-realisation. One participant reflected: *"Even when girls are educated, they're expected to prioritise marriage and family over their careers. This mindset needs to change. Girls should be*

*educated for their own empowerment, not just to get a good husband.*" (Participant 24, age 28, personal communication, February 28, 2025).

This quotation captures a larger dissatisfaction shared by several interviewees. It reaffirms that obtaining an education by itself does not ensure transformative change unless it is coupled with a shift in societal attitudes about gender roles. This participant notes that acknowledging women's education as meaningful in and of itself, rather than only to enhance marriage prospects, is necessary for true empowerment.

Moreover, a finding from the FGD1 was the generational gap and the slow but important shifts in women's perception of their role and freedom over time. Younger participants, especially MASUM girls from the '*Education Fellowship Programme*' and '*Empowerment Through Sport Program*', were more outspoken in their reluctance to echo older women's descriptions of early marriage and domestic work as inevitable: *"I will not marry early. I have seen what happens to women like my mother. I want a different life."* (Participants 15-15 FGD1, ages 19, personal communication, February 20, 2025).

One added on this topic saying: *"Women in leadership positions are now more widely accepted and respected. The notion that women are only suited for domestic roles is slowly fading, and women are being recognised for their capabilities and leadership skills."* (Participant 12, age 23, personal communication, February 18, 2025).

When taken as a whole, all these stories highlight how gender norms are dynamic and always being contested, particularly by young women who are creating new leadership models based on self-assurance, tenacity, and community support despite social expectations.

## ***2.4 Differences Between Rural and Urban Pathways to Leaderships***

This section deepens the comparative analysis by focusing on how geographic context shapes women's pathways to the labour market and leadership, especially in the aftermath of education. While the inequalities in infrastructure and educational opportunities were covered in Section 1.4, this section focuses on how leadership potential is developed, viewed, and either encouraged or inhibited in various socio-spatial contexts. While both environments present challenges, the form and intensity of these differ greatly, especially in terms of mobility, educational access, and exposure to NGOs. This segment directly addresses sub-question **2) *How do rural and urban***



***differences in educational infrastructure, social expectations, and labour conditions affect women's leadership trajectories?***

*a. Informal vs. Formal Leadership Recognition*

In rural areas, women's leadership is often relational, informal, and embedded within community service, which frequently goes unrecognised by formal structures. Although they hardly ever called themselves "*leaders*", many of the women I have talked to frequently exercised leadership characteristics in unofficial capacities, such as planning health awareness campaigns, running neighbourhood self-help groups, or mentoring younger females. One of the participants interviewed was recognised as a local role model and served as the anchor for events such as Youth Day and Lokshahi Utsav (a festival of democracy), but she never referred to herself as a "*leader*":

*Education has empowered me with knowledge and confidence. This confidence has enabled me to take on community leadership roles and organise various programmes in my village, such as 'Bal Diwas' (Children's Day), 'Yuva Diwas' (National Youth Day), and 'Lokshahi Utsav' (Festival of Democracy). I've even started organising these events independently.* (Participant 2, age 19, personal communication, February 9, 2025).

On the other hand, in urban areas leadership was more commonly associated with formal roles and certified job positions. Nevertheless, MASUM allows women to nurture their leadership skills and encourages them to take charge in various areas. By providing them with the opportunity to participate and engage in different activities and programmes, we helped build their confidence and empowered them to become leaders.

A Saswad-based MASUM employee explained that before she started working for the organisation, she was helping plan events, give speeches in public, and create street plays for villagers. These activities were crucial for developing and reinforcing her leadership identity: "*With MASUM, I've had opportunities to take on leadership roles. Notably, I've led fieldwork initiatives for Bachat Gat – "Savings Group", empowering women through financial inclusion.*" (Participant 4, age 28, personal communication, February 10, 2025).

Another girl from the urban MASUM office said, "*Thanks to MASUM, I began anchoring programmes and events, including those organised by the self-help groups. I even gave speeches at local municipality events without telling my family because I wanted to do it for myself.*" (Participant 23, age 22, personal communication, February 24, 2025).

*b. Mobility and Exposure to Networks*

When talking to women in the villages around Saswad, one common difference between urban and rural contexts was that rural women have more challenges when it comes to mobility and networking opportunities for their careers. This in turn limits their contact with people in leadership positions or even in good job opportunities, which then constrains their leadership development or aspirations. One of the girls currently pursuing her Bachelor of Science in Nursing (B.Sc. Nursing) stated:

*During training periods, some of the female fellow students assigned to hospitals in the big city have already found connections, which can then lead to job opportunities. I've realised the importance of networking, but I haven't had many chances to develop these connections yet.* (Participant 3, age 19, personal communication, February 9, 2025).

Another girl currently pursuing her BCom (Bachelor of Commerce) emphasised even more the disparities in networking opportunities, but this time not only comparing it to urban areas but also looking at her male counterparts:

*There are hardly any networking spaces for young girls; most successful people are men, so it's hard for women to reach out, especially if you cannot go to a big city. For rural girls especially, having a supportive women's network could make all the difference.* (Participant 22, age 31, personal communication, February 24, 2025).

This illustrates how both limited mobility and lack of exposure to professional environments significantly affect rural women's ability to build networks, access important information and establish mentorship relationships. These are elements crucial for career advancement and leadership opportunities. Unlike their urban counterparts, women in rural areas are often constrained by social norms, safety concerns and infrastructural barriers that limit their physical and social movement. Consequently, they encounter a double disadvantage: not only are they less likely to be in environments where opportunities arise, but they also lack the informal channels through which such opportunities are often shared or facilitated. This systematic absence of access perpetuates gendered and geographic disparities in leadership trajectories.

*c. Resistance and Surveillance in Rural Areas*

Another crucial element of rural women's access to leadership trajectories is the pervasive social surveillance and moral gatekeeping that they experience in their everyday lives. It was repeatedly

described by participants that rigid gender norms and community expectations placed women under constant scrutiny. This behaviour was said to limit the women's physical movement, regulate their appearance, and constrain their personal agency. One respondent highlighted the list of prohibitions usually rural girls have to grow up with:

*While growing up, I constantly heard people tell me that 'girls shouldn't go out at night alone; girls shouldn't wear showing clothes; girls shouldn't behave like that; girls shouldn't go anywhere without permission; they should always be back home before the sunset and behave as expected.' These restrictions suffocate girls and force them to fight against them to move forward. This is the harsh reality. (Participants FGD2 18-21, ages 40-45, personal communications, February 22, 2025).*

These informal "social laws" serve to reinforce a culture of restricted mobility, mandatory conformity, and a lack of autonomy, all of which collectively shape the way women engage in leadership roles. The policing of behaviour, attire, and movement functions as a constant reminder of what is regarded as "appropriate" for women, thereby reinforcing the notion that visibility, assertiveness, or leadership are unnatural or dangerous for girls.

This resistance is not only external. The internalisation of social expectations has been demonstrated to have a significant impact on the ambition and decision-making of young women, often resulting in self-doubt and hesitation in pursuing opportunities. For instance, one participant noted:

*Many girls struggle internally with low self-esteem, doubting their abilities and hesitant to ask parents for permission to participate in after-school activities. This comes from a lack of communication with parents and the weight of their expectations. Women and girls need to cultivate more self-advocacy, which is crucial in building confidence and independence. (Participant 6, age 13, personal communication, February 10, 2025).*

Another participant mentioned that even when she was behaving accordingly and as expected, some family members would still doubt her: *"My father-in-law would doubt me, saying that I might be going somewhere else instead of work. He would suspect me even though I was going out to work."* (Participants 15-16, FGD1, age 19, personal communication, February 20, 2025).

Notwithstanding these constraints, many women actively resist and challenge these norms every day by leading sports teams, organising youth assemblies, planning community inclusion

events, mentoring younger girls, and simply asserting their right to education. Nevertheless, the emotional and social cost of doing so is significantly higher for rural women, who frequently find themselves having to defend their choices not only to their families but also to neighbours and other village people. This dynamic of surveillance and resistance adds a critical layer to understanding why rural leadership pathways are often informal, hard-won, and less recognised, despite the strength and persistence of those who take them.

#### *d. Urban Women Face Different Constraints*

Whilst urban women may encounter greater opportunities, they are subject to pressures to conform to professional norms and encounter more subtle forms of gender bias, such as the undermining of their leadership by male relatives or the tokenisation of their representation in leadership roles.

*Women are scarcely represented in leadership positions. Even when they are present, it is often tokenistic, and they are not given the same level of respect or opportunities as men. Often the current representation of women in leadership positions is merely a facade, a way to show that they are there.* (Participant 4, age 28, personal communication, February 10, 2025).

This finding indicates that patriarchal gatekeeping persists across both settings, yet it manifests in different ways and through different channels.

While women residing in rural areas frequently exercise informal and relational leadership within constrained environments, those residing in urban areas may have access to formal spaces but continue to grapple with patriarchal structures and expectations. The acknowledgement of leadership and the individuals permitted to assume such roles continue to be profoundly influenced by local norms and the availability of networks.

### **INTERIM CONCLUSION OF THE CHAPTER**

Through the three sections of the thematic analysis, this chapter has highlighted the main findings from the interviews, revealing that, while education is widely recognised by women as a vital source of confidence, autonomy, and leadership potential, its impact is shaped and often constrained by entrenched sociocultural factors, unequal labour market conditions, and regional disparities. Hence, its empowering potential, although present and evident, remains limited. In the

first section, participants highlighted education as a transformative tool, yet one that requires sustained support to overcome financial hardship, domestic expectations, and mobility constraints, particularly in rural areas. The second section revealed how caste, class, and gender intersect to reproduce exclusion even for educated women, affecting both their access to employment and recognition in leadership roles. Finally, the third section raised critical questions about whether education alone is enough, highlighting the need for intersectional policy responses and the indispensable role of feminist grassroots organisations like MASUM in fostering lasting empowerment. These findings suggest that education must be embedded within broader systemic and relational frameworks to truly enable women's leadership and labour force participation. The next chapter critically examines these dynamics and their implications.

## CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

---

This chapter critically engages with the key themes that emerged from the analysis of the twenty semi-structured individual interviews and the two FGDs with stakeholders, including MASUM staff, programme participants, local leaders, and community members. Drawing two months of immersive fieldwork in Pune district, the findings highlight the intricate relationship between education, empowerment, and the deeply embedded social structures of caste, class and gender.

The study confirms education's transformative effect, especially in raising aspirations, critical awareness, and self-confidence. However, it also reveals that women's education alone does not automatically translate into FLFP or long-term empowerment. Given India's multifaceted socio-cultural landscape, education's power for social and economic empowerment remains constrained by structural inequalities, persistent gender norms, and inadequate support networks. This chapter interprets findings through existing literature, the conceptual framework (addressed in Chapter Two), and rural Maharashtra's broader socio-political context. It explores how girls and women navigate systems of opportunity and marginalisation, and how grassroots programmes like MASUM impact their paths to empowerment, leadership, and agency. Through an intersectional interpretation of the participants' lived experiences, the discussion questions the potential and constraints of education as a stand-alone approach to gender-inclusive development.

### **ENABLERS AND CONSTRAINTS TO TRANSFORMATIVE EMPOWERMENT**

This section critically examines the elements that either support or undermine education's potential as a transformative instrument for women's empowerment, building on fieldwork findings and the thematic analysis. While educational interventions have created pathways for greater aspiration and self-confidence, there is still disparity in how these gains translate into long-term agency and leadership. Based on field observations and interview narratives, the research emphasises the interaction of informal community dynamics, policy awareness, institutional support systems, and sociocultural resistance.

### ***1. Role of NGOs and Grassroots Support System***

Grassroots organisations, like MASUM and others, have become important facilitators of empowerment, acting not only as service providers but also as catalysts for social transformation. *MASUM 'Education Fellowship' and 'Empowerment Through Sport' Programmes* were acknowledged by a high number of respondents as boosting their self-esteem, broadening their perspective, and offering secure environments for group education. By using feminist pedagogies that prioritised discussion, critical thinking, and peer support, these programmes promoted both individual and group empowerment.

In addition to the content that was presented, participants often described these experiences as transformative due to the relational and affective spaces that were established. Supportive mentors, group solidarity, and the affirmation of girls' experiences allowed for a change in how they saw themselves and promoted more active participation in civic and family life. MASUM's long-standing embeddedness in local contexts, particularly in rural villages, has enabled deep trust-building – crucial for meaningful and sustained engagement with marginalised women and girls. This significance was powerfully captured in the words of the village women during the FGD2 in Udachiwadi village, where they all stated:

*MASUM has been doing work in our village since 1989, and Vaishali Tai (MASUM staff) has been helping us since then. She is with MASUM, and because of them, there has been a lot of development in the village.* (Participants 15-16 FGD1, age 19, personal communication, February 20, 2025)

In addition to reflecting the organisation's historical presence, this quote highlights how participants associate MASUM with both tangible village development and their own personal development over time.

### ***2. Informal Practices and Community-based Strategies***

In addition to formal interventions, women also engaged in informal practices and community-based strategies to navigate socio-cultural constraints. Occasionally, progressive family members, particularly fathers and older brothers, offered resistance to restrictive norms. Furthermore, the existence of informal mentorships and women's collectives gave rise to alternative networks of solidarity that functioned outside the confines of institutional frameworks.

It is evident that daily acts of resistance, including such actions as negotiating mobility, deferring marriage, and continuing education despite opposition, have been shown to emerge as powerful indicators of agency. These practices underscore the notion that empowerment is frequently a negotiated and context-specific process, rather than a linear outcome of formal education. Instead of completely defying prevailing societal norms, many women showed resilience and strategic agency by implementing tactical forms of compliance and adaptability.

### ***3. Policy Implications, Resistance and Systemic Gaps***

In general, most interviews revealed a general lack of awareness among participants about existing gender-focused policies and state programme's intended to support women's empowerment. They underlined that without MASUM's efforts to increase awareness and aggressively spread information throughout the local communities, most of them would not have been able to take advantage of these schemes because they had little understanding of them.

Additionally, some of them added that in instances where awareness was present even without MASUM's efforts, it was frequently accompanied by a degree of scepticism concerning the efficacy or accessibility of such initiatives. It was further noted by several respondents that there were issues from the government's side in poor implementation, inadequate outreach in rural areas, and the failure to adequately address intersecting dimensions of marginalisation, such as caste and class.

Furthermore, participants indicated the absence of targeted follow-up mechanisms to provide support to girls beyond the initial stages of education. This disparity frequently resulted in discontinuities in the trajectories of empowerment, particularly in instances where young women encountered limited access to vocational training, employment prospects, or sustained mentorship. These insights indicate a necessity for more holistic and context-sensitive policy design, informed by bottom-up feedback from local communities.

*While the local governance bodies like Gram Panchayats, have been entrusted with organising programmes for women's empowerment, the implementation often falls short. Despite receiving directives from the state government, they frequently respond only on paper, without taking concrete actions. However, there are encouraging signs. Recently, the Panchayat Samiti has initiated training programmes focused on women's startups and*



*education, aiming to empower women and promote their socio-economic growth.*

(Participant 4, age 28, personal communication, February 10, 2025)

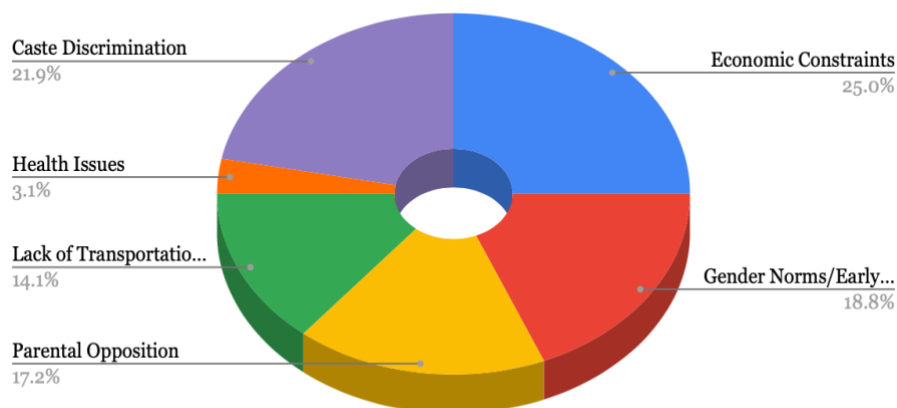
#### 4. Cultural Resistance and Backlash

Despite the advances achieved through educational initiatives and grassroots efforts, many women faced backlash, both implicit and explicit, which jeopardised their progress. The challenges experienced by individuals in this regard have been widely documented, with resistance from family members, social stigma, and fear of exclusion being the most cited factors. This often leads individuals to drop out of education to not face these pressures (*See Figure 5*). It was reported by some interviewees that they had been compelled to conceal their involvement in programmes or modify their behaviour to avoid provoking conflict within their respective communities.

The psychological impact of such resistance was evident in stories of emotional fatigue, fear of ostracism, and internalised guilt. Nevertheless, several women also demonstrated remarkable perseverance, drawing strength from peer networks and role models to sustain their journeys toward empowerment. It is evident from these experiences that the process of empowerment is not a neutral or universally welcomed one; rather, it unfolds within contested and emotionally charged terrains.

*Figure 5: Main reasons for educational dropout <sup>11</sup>*

#### Main Reasons for Educational Dropout



<sup>11</sup> (data collected from the interviews = N of mentions of each category in all interviews).

## BEYOND EDUCATION: IS IT ENOUGH?

This section synthesises the research findings to evaluate whether education alone sufficiently enables women's empowerment, improves their access to the labour market, and enables them to attain leadership positions. It directly addresses sub-question 3) *Is education alone sufficient to empower women, or are targeted feminist policies and grassroots activism necessary to enable transformative change?* Drawing on interview data, this section analyses how educational attainment, especially in rural Maharashtra, translates into tangible opportunities and social recognition for women. It examines the gap between educational access and true empowerment, highlighting the necessity of addressing intersecting socio-cultural inequalities to foster lasting and significant change.

### 3.1 The Empowering Potential of Education

This dissertation reveals education's undeniable potential as a catalyst for individual empowerment. Narratives from participants demonstrate increased confidence, enhanced mobility, greater agency in decision-making, and greater economic awareness among young women and girls. This is very much linked to the theories discussed in Chapter Two, especially on what Kabeer (1999) and Stromquist (2002) examined about empowerment's effects. Education often empowers them to delay marriage, negotiate with parents and speak up in family and community settings. A young student and player in the MASUM 'Empowerment Through Sport Programme' stated, *"My self-confidence grew; I became more knowledgeable and aware of my rights, and I learnt to respond to wrong things. Now, my dream is to become an IPS (Indian Police Officer) officer."* (Participant 5, age 13, personal communication, February 10, 2025). Similarly, another young girl articulated a clear career aspiration: *"My goal is to become a Hindi teacher after completing my education."* (Participant 6, age 13, personal communication, February 10, 2025).

Through my research I discovered that sport-based learning, as exemplified by MASUM's programmes, emerged as a particularly effective medium for empowerment, not only on a mental level but also physically. Participants underscored how engaging in sport instilled discipline, enhanced public speaking skills, and fostered collaborative decision-making. One of the players mentioned that *"Playing volleyball has been a transformative experience, teaching us invaluable lessons in teamwork, unity, and collaboration [...] we're inspired to create positive change"* (Participant 8, age 13, personal communication, February 12, 2025). This aligns with feminist theories of capability from Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000), underscoring how education builds

essential inner resources and expanded freedoms. However, this also may suggest that while education provides individual tools, the complete realisation of capabilities often requires multidimensional and multilevel collective supports.

### ***3.2 The Persistent Gap: When Education is Not Enough***

Despite education's empowering potential, findings critically examine a persistent gap between educational attainment and meaningful recognition, access to formal labour markets, and leadership roles. Numerous examples revealed that highly educated and determined women are still excluded from domestic or professional decision-making, suggesting broader structural and normative barriers. One of MASUM's longest-serving staff members pointed out that *"Even if a woman gets an education and starts a job, this patriarchal society does not allow women to express their opinions."* (Participant 10, age 54, personal communication, February 14, 2025).

This so-called *'educated but still silent'* phenomenon demonstrates the enduring societal expectation for women to conform to traditional roles. The participants of the first FGD recounted that often, women are appreciated more if they conform to certain social norms and do not challenge stereotypes. Furthermore, one staff member from MASUM's Hadapsar-Pune office stated that *"Even when girls are educated, they're expected to prioritise marriage and family over their careers. This mindset needs to change. Girls should be educated for their own empowerment, not just to get a good husband."* (Participant 24, age 28, personal communication, February 28, 2025). This perspective aligns with a broader societal understanding as explored by Mahata, Khan, and Mandal (2023). Their theoretical evaluation of the dowry system in India sheds light on how education can paradoxically become entwined with economic and social considerations, sometimes even perceived as a 'dowry' or means to secure a more desirable marital match (Mahata, Khan, and Mandal, 2023). The study indicates that while education can sometimes be pursued to reduce dowry demands in some cases, it can also lead to higher demands (Mahata, Khan, and Mandal, 2023). Therefore, this shows the persistent sociocultural barriers where a woman's education is not always valued for her individual empowerment or career aspirations but rather instrumentalised within the context of marriage and family expectations. Overall, this evidence critiques the assumption that pursuing education automatically translates to substantive empowerment or leadership, pointing out the distinction between symbolic participation and genuine agency within a patriarchal system. The data strongly suggests that education alone cannot fully dismantle deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms and multidimensional barriers.

Specifically, the research revealed the following key barriers that limit the impact of education:

1. **Limited economic independence:** Despite their education, many women lack financial independence, which limits their capacity to engage in community activities or seek leadership positions.
2. **Lack of access to Social Capital:** Education does not inherently provide access to the informal networks and social capital that are sometimes essential for leadership. MASUM's initiatives are essential for establishing these networks.
3. **Disproportionate Domestic Burden:** Educated women disproportionately shoulder home and caregiving responsibilities, limiting their availability and capacity for public leadership positions.
4. **Resistance to Women in Leadership:** Entrenched community standards and familial expectations often prevent women from assuming public leadership positions, regardless of their educational qualifications.

### ***3.3 Role of Feminist NGOs and Intersectional Support***

The findings clearly show that education's transformative potential is often supported and protected by the work of local grassroots NGOs. These organisations offer substantive empowerment, establishing environments where women can redefine leadership beyond traditional frameworks.

NGOs, despite often having restricted capacity and reach, serve as vital extended arms of support, ensuring that information and beneficial policies reach rural communities, usually the ones that need it the most. Their work has clearly contributed to shifting perspectives in rural villages, influencing older generations and shaping younger individuals on women's education, empowerment, rights, employment, caste issues, supports for survivors of domestic and GBV, and many more.

MASUM's multilayered approach, integrating education with a rights-based exposure, sport, and legal literacy, illustrates this. The organisation's role in providing mentorship, safe spaces, and fostering peer solidarity, particularly through youth groups and the *Education Fellowship Programme*, is critical. Empowerment, as identified through MASUM's influence, is a continuous process, not a one-time outcome (Invally, Gupte, & Miwa, 2009). MASUM's Education

Fellowship programme specifically keeps girls in education for longer, so it helps them from getting trapped in the marriage cycle and the financial challenge of continuing education while also promoting independent work. Furthermore, MASUM offers professional training for microbusinesses, crucial for financial independence. On one note, MASUM actively challenges traditional gender division of labour by offering vocational courses in medicine, electricity and driving, moving past conventional “sewing and etc.” trainings. The provision of feminist counselling grounded in a rights-based, survivor-centred approach ensuring emotional support and respecting women's autonomy, which also emerged as a vital service

In conclusion, to achieve comprehensive women's empowerment requires a multi-pronged approach that transcends formal education. It necessitates a combination of: **1) Individual tools (education, confidence, agency,); 2) Structural change (through targeted, context-specific policies); 3) Collective support (NGOs, civil society, international actors, safe environments, mentorship, etc).**

My findings align with concepts explored in the existing literature and theoretical frameworks (Chapter Two) that promote a comprehensive understanding of empowerment. While the literature emphasises education as a key driver, this research adds nuance by showcasing its inherent limits when confronted with deeply entrenched socio-cultural barriers and structural inequalities. It underlines how the translation of education as a pathway to empowerment into tangible opportunities is not automatic but influenced by societal norms and the availability of support ecosystems. This prompts important questions about dominant development paradigms that may excessively depend on formal education, failing to sufficiently confront wider societal barriers.

The findings not only reveal that the **hypothesis** of this dissertation is confirmed but also shed light on the complex interplay of individual agency, structural inequalities and grassroots activism in shaping women's empowerment. They underscore the persistence of some gaps that are not able to be dismantled solely through education but through multidimensional and multilayered policies.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS:**

Findings suggest that existing policies, while increasing educational attainment, often fall short due to implementation gaps, inadequate accountability, and an inability to confront fundamental

structural obstacles such as gendered societal norms, unsafe public environments, and caste discrimination. Policies should move beyond enrolment objectives to guarantee meaningful empowerment, necessitating extensive social protection, infrastructural advancement, and a robust monitoring system. NGOs like MASUM offer essential frameworks for tackling these obstacles via multidimensional, community-driven initiatives. Their success is attributed to cultivating trust, providing localised assistance, and contesting conventions via actual participation, highlighting the need for more coordination and financing for these organisations. The study reinforces empowerment as an intersectional and non-linear construct. It is not only a product of education, but a complex process shaped by the interaction of human agency, societal institutions, and communal action. It emphasises that the "capability" (Sen, 1999) developed via education often needs a conducive "conversion environment" (Nussbaum, 2000) to be completely actualised into "functionings".

## CHAPTER SEVEN: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

---

Building on the previous chapters, which examined how empowerment through education enables women to access leadership and the labour market, considering the influence of caste and class, this chapter provides policymakers with actionable, regionally grounded policy recommendations with potential for broader application across India. These seek to mitigate structural and systematic patterns of exclusion, including caste and gender-based discrimination, while strengthening education's role as a meaningful catalyst for empowerment, labour participation, and access to leadership positions.

Drawing on insights gained from twenty semi-structured individual interviews, two FGDs, and ethnographic observations conducted in collaboration with MASUM, this chapter is structured in three parts: 1) policy recommendations and best practices from qualitative findings; 2) reflections on current policy gaps based on the lived experiences of community members and NGO practitioners; and 3) overarching recommendations for local governments, NGOs and international actors.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM INTERVIEWS

The qualitative data gathered reveals community-based, bottom-up strategies effective in fostering empowerment and educational access for young women and girls. Participants frequently emphasised the importance of **safe spaces, mentorship, and community trust** as fundamental preconditions for empowerment, particularly in rural and caste-divided contexts. The following recommendations derive directly from recurring themes and suggestions shared by respondents and aimed at policymakers at the district level, NGOs, civil society, and international development partners. Instead of proposing new policies, interviewees stressed the necessity to enhance, modify, and democratise current systems for greater accessibility, transparency, and inclusiveness.

#### *a. Policies to Address Root Causes*

**Long-term policies to address structural and institutionalised gender inequalities:**

1. **Increase financing and allocation of resources for gender-sensitive teacher training programmes and inclusive school curricula** that prioritise critical thinking, the

acquisition of life skills, and awareness regarding gender equality and caste discrimination awareness.

2. **Expand and institutionalise feminist pedagogies** employed by NGOs like MASUM (grounded in local realities) which promote self-expression, peer support, and leadership through dialogue and sport.
3. **Mandate the integration of school-based mentorship programmes** into state education policy, allocating funds for after-school clubs and regular interactions with local women leaders across sectors.
4. **Establish awareness sessions** (by government, schools, and NGOs) for families to reshape local perceptions regarding women's education and employment outside the home, a frequent recommendation from elder community members.

#### **Long-term policies to enhance women's access to education and leadership opportunities:**

Despite significant progress (Chapter Three for existing policies), an estimated 35 per cent of girls in India remain out of school. Closing this gap is essential to prevent structural disadvantage at an early age (UN Women, personal communication, April 29, 2025):

1. **Ensure free and accessible education beyond Class 10**, including reimbursements for supplementary expenses such as transportation, uniforms, digital gadgets, and textbooks, as stressed by many young interviewees. MASUM's efforts were able to cover these costs, but national governments' schemes often fall short.
2. **Create locally relevant skill-building and vocational training initiatives** (in collaboration with local industry) aligned with local labour markets. Introduce women and young girls to non-traditional sectors such as governance, environmental stewardship, digital literacy, and STEM.
3. **Implement leadership development programmes** for adolescent girls and young women in government schools and colleges, inspired by MASUM's Fellowship programme, including modules on public speaking, civic rights, and collective decision-making. Interviewees advocated for enhanced monitoring (e.g., local government audits, civil society oversight) and support mechanisms to counter "proxy leadership"<sup>12</sup>.

---

<sup>12</sup> Where women elected in the Gram Panchayat (village council) as Sarpanch (Head) merely act as symbols and the decisions are taken by male relatives.



4. **Establish secure and respectful access to educational institutions** by investing in cost-effective gender-responsive transport systems, operational sanitary facilities (especially for females), and school infrastructure. Local respondents and Kanta Singh,<sup>13</sup> observed that dangerous pathways or inadequate amenities contributed to school dropouts (Kanta Singh, UN Women, personal communication, April 29, 2025).
5. **Prioritise social protection initiatives**, like travel subsidies, menstrual health support, and childcare facilities, recognised as crucial instruments for continuing education and public engagement.

### **Long-term policies to improve and enhance women's safety as a fundamental pillar of empowerment:**

Safety is an essential prerequisite for women's empowerment. Fear, both physical and digital, restricts women's and girls' access to education, employment, and leadership aspirations (Kanta Singh, UN Women, personal communication, April 29, 2025). While this emphasis shouldn't be necessary in an equitable society, it remains a stark reality.

Essential areas where safety must be emphasised:

1. **At home:**
  - a. Enhance and contextualise domestic and gender-based violence prevention (GBV) initiatives.
  - b. Boost accessibility to confidential reporting systems and support services, encompassing helplines and shelters.
  - c. Advocate for workshops focused on gender equality, conflict resolution, and healthy relationships in schools and communities.
2. **In public settings:**
  - a. Invest in gender-responsive urban planning, stressing adequately illuminated roadways, secure marketplaces, and protected communal areas.
  - b. Institutionalise participatory safety audits with women's organisations and municipal bodies, and tie audit findings to budget allocations for local infrastructure.

---

<sup>13</sup> Kanta Singh: UN Women deputy country representative India, with whom I had an interview.

- c. Establish community patrols and grievance redress mechanisms with the active involvement of youth and women.
3. In **professional settings**:
- a. Implement workplace harassment legislation (e.g., POSH Act) in both public and private sectors, comprising rural employment initiatives.
  - b. Establish internal complaints committees in all registered workplaces and deliver gender-sensitive training.
  - c. Provide governmental (national and local) incentives to enterprises adopting inclusive safety protocols and flexible work arrangements.
4. In **transport systems**:
- a. Implement gender-sensitive, subsidised public transport in rural/urban areas.
  - b. Integrate GPS tracking and emergency response technologies in public buses and shared automobiles.
  - c. Prioritise last-mile connectivity for school-aged girls and employed women via secure walking paths or community transit.
5. In **online and digital environments**:
- a. Establish digital safety education initiatives in schools and community centres, emphasising privacy, consent, and online conduct.
  - b. Leverage technology as a positive tool to support women's digital empowerment, financial independence, and civic engagement.
  - c. Expand digital access for women, especially in rural areas, offering digital literacy and safety trainings, and create supportive ecosystems for tech-based female entrepreneurship.
  - d. Enhance legislation and enforcement pertaining to cyberharassment, including quicker response units for digital grievances.
  - e. Collaborate with technology platforms to create accessible reporting mechanisms and community moderating approaches.

Safety must be integrated into every facet of policy formulation and execution.

### ***b. Policies to tackle negative consequences of caste discrimination***

1. **Guarantee the effective enforcement and monitoring of antidiscrimination rules** by the government (national and local) in schools, health centres, and other public places, particularly for marginalised caste groups. Participants emphasised that reservation policies for lower castes can be ineffective or misused without proper monitoring, calling for transparent, needs-based targeting and inclusion of marginalised caste voices in program design.
2. **Establish incentives for inclusive educational settings**, incorporating strategic recruitment of educators from under-represented backgrounds and regular, in-person and online anti-bias trainings to ensure continuous learning and accountability.
3. **Enhance community outreach in rural regions** to address dropout rates associated with caste- and gender-based harassment. This includes the construction of support services, bilingual community hotlines, and mobile legal assistance units, especially in isolated areas.
4. **Institutionalise partnerships between the GoI, GoM and local NGOs** to act as mediators and protectors, promoting accountability. Interviewees noted that MASUM has played this role informally due to the government's operational constraints.

### ***c. Good Practices Identified***

Several good practices from MASUM's model could be replicated or enhanced:

1. **Long-term, trust-based engagement of staff** in rural regions fosters credibility and boosts impact, often overlooked in policy design focused on short-term projects.
2. **Initiatives that integrate education, physical activity, and peer support** enable girls to remain in school and envision themselves as meaningful agents for transformation (demonstrated by the Fellowship programme's consistent staff-student interaction).
3. **Participation of local female personnel**, many of whom were previous recipients, fosters a sustainable circle of empowerment and trust within communities.
4. **Efforts to educate children from an early age on the importance of gender equality** (MASUM's youth programme) and mainstreaming into school curriculums, already starting from kindergarten and primary school.

### ***Reflecting on Policy Gaps and Lived Experiences***

Despite the presence of numerous national governmental initiatives designed to enhance girls' education and women's workforce engagement, interviewees articulated enduring structural disparities and contradictions in terms of aspirations, family expectations, and traditional society perspectives. These policy deficiencies are not simply technical errors; they are fundamentally entrenched in social structures and neglect of localised realities.

Many women and young girls indicated that without MASUM's work, government-offered scholarships and educational schemes are rarely accessible due to intricate bureaucratic processes. For girls from rural, low-income, or lower-caste homes, these obstacles frequently result in dropout or insufficient engagement with programmes designed to assist them. A MASUM fellow remarked, *"They claim there are policies, yet we are unaware of their application, and the government does not provide clarification. Influence or better connections are necessary."*

Another persistent issue was the **disparity between school content and the lived experiences** of rural girls. Curricula frequently perpetuate passivity instead of fostering critical thinking. A MASUM educator stated, *"Schools should teach students that knowledge and education are not only learning from books but from reality. The caste issue should be included in the syllabus"* (Participant 10, age 54, personal communication, February 14, 2025).

Interviewees also emphasised the absence of **accountability in execution**. Community members reported that infrastructure pledged by government initiatives, like girls' restrooms or transportation, often remains incomplete or non-operational, leading to significant dropouts. *"My house was three kilometres away from the bus stop; no one was ensuring my safety,"* a university student noted (lives in Saswad but studies in Pune city).

These reflections indicate a necessity to progress from policy formulation to **participatory, community-driven implementation and assessment**. No single cause or one-size-fits-all solution exists; instead, multidimensional and practical policies are needed to address the complexity of these persistent issues. Without monitoring and accountability mechanisms to ensure policies effectively reach and adapt to the most marginalised, exclusion will persist.

### ***Overarching Policy Recommendations for Local Governments, NGOS, and International Actors***

Based on participants' insights, the following practical policy recommendations seek to advance transformative and inclusive empowerment strategies through a multidimensional and multilevel approach:

#### **1. Ground Policy Formulation in Lived Realities Through Intersectional & Inclusive Approaches**

Policy formulation and implementation should be firmly rooted in the lived experiences of rural communities, especially those of marginalised women and girls in Maharashtra. It's important to establish regular discussions (village councils, town halls) with local women's organisations (e.g., MASUM), educators, and youth to co-create relevant, context-specific programming, complementing existing *Gram Sabha* (village assembly) and *Mahila Sabha* (village women-only meetings). Ensure all policies are accessible by ensuring local language translations and clear instructions. This requires gathering and analysing a large sample of disaggregated data to monitor equity outcomes and ensure targeted support reaches those facing layered forms of marginalisation.

#### **2. Strengthen Gender-Sensitive and Contextualised Education**

Integrate feminist pedagogies into school curricula that promote critical thinking (focusing on the student's ability to understand core concepts and connect through themes), address gender stereotypes, and represent rural and caste-based experiences. Allocate resources for the professional development of teachers/professors, particularly in public schools, to foster participatory and inclusive learning strategies.

#### **3. Facilitating Women's Access to the Formal Labour Market**

To diminish women's dependence on frequently unstable and underpaid work, policies must promote and incentivise women's access to dignified, formal employment<sup>14</sup>. Structural barriers like unsafe public spaces, rigid social norms and inadequate care infrastructure continue to limit women's economic participation and leadership (Kanta Singh, UN Women, personal communication, April 29, 2025). Hence, policy responses must go beyond education – to address these multidimensional limitations – and include targeted investments in safe infrastructure, including well-lit roads, secure transport, and workplace protections. These are essential to ensure

---

<sup>14</sup> especially among rural, lower-caste, and economically vulnerable groups.

women's choices, freedom of movement and public presence. These initiatives should be supplemented by:

- a) **Enhancing governmental recognition and safeguarding of informal and unpaid employment** (in agriculture, domestic work, and caregiving) through legal protections and social security mechanisms (e.g., minimum wages, pensions, and maternity benefits) to defend women's rights and support economic empowerment.
- b) **Ensuring access to fundamental services**, including affordable childcare, healthcare, menstrual health products, housing, and transport subsidies, which are crucial for ongoing participation in education, employment, and leadership. Policymaking in India should adopt a more comprehensive, holistic approach by viewing the issues not only economically but also socially.
- c) **Promoting multi-stakeholder collaboration** with NGOs, academia, government, and donors to scale grassroots innovations, co-host leadership initiatives, and facilitate cross-learning (Kanta Singh, UN Women, personal communication, April 29, 2025)
- d) **Developing specialised job placement and skill enhancement initiatives** for rural girls and young women, focusing on non-traditional sectors like digital services, public administration, and environmental governance. These must address caste, mobility, and gendered expectations around unpaid care work.
- e) **Promote and institutionalise the idea of women as entrepreneurs and startup owners.**

#### 4. Guarantee Financial and Institutional Backing for Gender Equality

Although improving, current allocations are still inadequate to tackle the persistent gender inequities in education, employment, and leadership in India. Significant, long-term investments from governmental and private sectors are crucial to concretely promote women's empowerment, facilitate employment preparedness, and ensure the sustainability of transformative projects.

Specific budget allocations must be established and safeguarded for gender-sensitive infrastructure, teacher training, leadership enhancement, vocational skill development, and social protection initiatives. Financial obligations must be scrutinised via participatory budget monitoring frameworks involving women's rights organisations and underprivileged communities. Institutional reforms must encompass the integration of gender equality in policymaking, capacity enhancement for gender focal points across ministries, and incentives to advance women into leadership positions at all administrative tiers.

**INTERIM CONCLUSION:**

Drawing on the lived experiences of women/girls from Pune district, grassroots insights, and development and feminist scholarship, these policy recommendations provide an inclusive and responsive framework for gender-transformative policymaking. This strategy targets immediate barriers to education and leadership, like caste-based exclusion, mobility limitations, and patriarchal norms, while tackling the underlying structural disparities that marginalise women in both formal and informal contexts.

This chapter has highlighted the necessity for collaborative, community-based, and multidimensional initiatives that prioritise women's voices in development and governance. To achieve significant impact, policies require enduring collaboration among national and local level governments, educational institutions, civil society, NGOs, and international development entities, ensuring mechanisms for transparency, accountability, and local engagement. As Kanta Singh (UN Women, personal communication, April 29, 2025) notes, structural change demands partnerships combining top-down resources with bottom-up insights. The ultimate objective extends beyond enhancing female enrolment or FLFPR; it must provide opportunities and foster an environment conducive to a dignified life and work, thereby promoting both economic and social empowerment of women.

Women's empowerment cannot be enforced from above. It must be founded on a bottom-up strategy, fostered within communities through inclusive leadership, liberating education, and systems valuing historically marginalised people's contributions. Ultimately, advancing women in rural Maharashtra necessitates not only governmental initiatives but also a shift in perspectives, redefining power, involvement, and potential. By actively listening to women's voices, assimilating their resistance techniques, and fostering their leadership across all sectors, we move towards a fair society where every girl and woman can learn, lead, and thrive.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

---

This dissertation explored the multifaceted relationship between education and women's empowerment, specifically analysing its influence on their participation in formal and informal leadership roles within Pune district, Maharashtra. Reflecting on the comprehensive fieldwork and thematic analysis, policy recommendations outlined in Chapter Seven, while crucial, hinge on a nuanced understanding of the systemic and lived realities unveiled by this research. The journey through the narratives of women in Pune has affirmed that policy is not merely top-down directive, but a dynamic engagement with prevailing social structures and individual agency.

The central research question guiding this research was: **How does access to education as a pathway to women's empowerment influence their meaningful participation in both formal and informal leadership roles in Pune district, Maharashtra?** The findings unequivocally demonstrate that education serves as a powerful catalyst for individual empowerment, fostering increased confidence, agency, and leadership aspirations. Participants consistently articulated how schooling enabled them to challenge social norms, delay early marriage, and secure a 'voice' within their families and communities. The transformative potential of education, especially coupled with non-cognitive skills and civic engagement are undeniable, is undeniable.

Nevertheless, the study reveals a critical nuance: education, while necessary is often not sufficient on its own to ensure women's full participation. The study confirms the hypothesis that despite increasing educational access, persistent structural barriers like caste hierarchies, traditional gender norms, and socio-cultural expectations, continue to severely limit women's ability to meaningfully enter, remain, and progress within the labour market and leadership spheres. The 'educated but still silent' phenomenon, where women with qualifications are still expected to conform to traditional roles, clearly illustrates this persistent gap. Moreover, the disparities between urban and rural contexts, concerning access to infrastructure, safe mobility, and exposure to networks, further shape and constrain women's leadership trajectories. Informal leadership, often unrecognized by formal structures, emerges as vital form of agency especially in rural contexts, broadening our understanding of what constitutes leadership.

These considerations underscore the essential function of feminist grassroots organisations, exemplified by MASUM. Their community-oriented, multifaceted strategy, combining education with rights-based consciousness, sports, and vocational training, creates the necessary "conversion



environment" (Nussbaum, 2000) that transforms educational skills into concrete "functionings" of empowerment. This must be complemented with increased local, regional and national governments' cooperation. MASUM's effectiveness is attributed to its enduring, trust-centric involvement and its persistent endeavours to confront entrenched patriarchal norms and caste prejudice. Without of localised, intersectional assistance, the transformational capacity of education is limited by a rigid social structure.

Despite rich insights, this dissertation is not without its limitations. Firstly, its qualitative nature and its specific focus on Pune district, Maharashtra, limits its generalisability to other Indian states or diverse socio-cultural contexts. While findings offer valuable insights into overarching national patterns, they may not capture the full variations across India. Pune, as educational hub, might represent an ideal scenario; conditions could be worse elsewhere. Secondly, reliance on the NGO mediation, while crucial for accessing marginalized communities and building trust, introduces potential for bias in participation selection and research framing. Future research could benefit from broader sampling methods and a diverse range of institutional collaborations. Lastly, this study fails to establish a *causal* relationship between education reforms, empowerment initiatives, and the changes in women's leadership roles. Data suggests relationships and shaping factors, but always with nuance, thereby highlighting the complexity and limits of interpretation. Further, research involving broader sampling, longitudinal studies and mixed-methods approaches, is necessary to provide stronger evidence and explore these complex interactions in greater depth.

In conclusion this thesis, is set out to examine the "Voices of Change" in rural Maharashtra, reinforcing the notion that, despite educational achievements, a substantial disparity remains in women's substantive involvement in leadership. True empowerment is not a linear result of formal education but a multifaceted, negotiated process influenced by overlapping societal institutions, human agency, and the pivotal contributions of support networks. This dissertation contributes to addressing this by elucidating that for education to genuinely function as a transformative force, policies must go beyond 'access' and actively dismantle systemic barriers, cultivate equitable social capital, mitigate domestic burdens, and confront opposition to women in leadership.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY:

---

- Almeida, F., & Morais, J. (2024). Non-formal education as a response to social problems in developing countries. *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 22(2), 122-138.
- Arora, A. (2025). Evaluating the Impact of the National Scheme of Incentive to Girls for Secondary Education (NSIGSE) on Gender Parity and Educational Equity in India (Order No. 32001051). Retrieved from [<https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/evaluating-impact-national-scheme-incentive-girls/docview/3207152607/se-2>]. [Accessed: 11 June 2025]
- Ban, R., & Rao, V. (2006). Tokenism or Agency? The Impact of Women's Reservations on Panchayats in South India.
- Batliwala, S. (2015). *Engaging with empowerment: An intellectual and experiential journey*. Women Unlimited.
- Becker, G. S. (1962). Investment in human capital: A theoretical analysis. *Journal of political economy*, 70(5, Part 2), 9-49.
- Census 2011 (2011) *Pune District Population Census, 2011–2025*. Maharashtra literacy, sex ratio and density. Retrieved from [<https://www.census2011.co.in/census/district/359-pune.html>].
- Chandra, A. (2025). The role of Education in Women's empowerment: Transforming societies through knowledge. *International Journal of Innovations & Research Analysis (IJIRA)*, Volume 05(No. 01(II)), 1–8. Retrieved from [<https://www.inspirajournals.com/uploads/Issues/2034649625.pdf>].
- Chattopadhyay, R., & Duflo, E. (2004). Women as policy makers: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India. *Econometrica*, 72(5), 1409-1443.
- Chowdhury, R. (2014). Family, femininity, feminism: 'Structures of feeling' in the articulation of men's rights, in (eds) KB Nielsen and A. Waldrop *Women, Gender, and Everyday Social Transformation in India*.

- Coombs, P. H., & Ahmed, M. (1974). *Attacking rural poverty. How nonformal education can help* (pp. xvi+-292pp).
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review* 43(6):1241–79.
- Crenshaw, K. (2013). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. In *Feminist legal theories* (pp. 23-51). Routledge.
- Eurostat. (2024). *Glossary: Labour market. Statistics Explained*. Retrieved from [[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Labour\\_market](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Labour_market)].
- FAVPNG.com. (n.d.). *Maharashtra Indian General Election, 2014 India Today Living Media PNG*. Retrieved From [[https://favpng.com/png\\_view/maharashtra-indian-general-election-2014-india-today-living-media-png/DqsnRvvW#google\\_vignette](https://favpng.com/png_view/maharashtra-indian-general-election-2014-india-today-living-media-png/DqsnRvvW#google_vignette)]. [Accessed: 12 June 2025].
- FitzGerald, J., & Mills, J. (2022). The importance of ethnographic observation in grounded theory research.
- Gluchman, Vasil. (2018). Nussbaum's philosophy of education as the foundation for human development. *Human Affairs*. 28. 328-338.
- Goldin, C. (1989). Life-cycle labor-force participation of married women: Historical evidence and implications. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 7(1), 20-47.
- Goldin, C. (1994). *The U-Shaped Female Labor Force Function in Economic Development and Economic History*. National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Goldin, C. (2006). The quiet revolution that transformed women's employment, education, and family. *American economic review*, 96(2), 1-21.
- Halperin, S., & Heath, O. (2020). *Political research: methods and practical skills*. Oxford University Press.
- Harber, C. (2014). *Education and international development: Theory, practice and issues*. Symposium Books Ltd.

- Harris, V., & Tuladhar, S. (2019). Humanitarian localisation: can we put values into practice?. In *Ethics in a crowded world: Globalisation, human movement and professional ethics* (Vol. 22, pp. 33-55). Emerald Publishing Limited.
- ILO. (2024, August 27). *India Employment Report 2024: Youth Employment, Education and skills*. International Labour Organisation. Retrieved from [\[https://www.ilo.org/publications/india-employment-report-2024-youth-employment-education-and-skills\]](https://www.ilo.org/publications/india-employment-report-2024-youth-employment-education-and-skills).
- Invally, P., Gupte, M., & Miwa, A. (2009). *Women's notions of rights and empowerment: A case study on MASUM's area of intervention in rural Maharashtra*. Grass Roots Initiatives for Social Transformations (GRIST). Internet Archive. Retrieved from [\[https://archive.org/details/sochara.11651.womensnotionsofr0000inva/page/12/mode/2up?q=%22mikaela+lee%22\]](https://archive.org/details/sochara.11651.womensnotionsofr0000inva/page/12/mode/2up?q=%22mikaela+lee%22).
- Jayachandran, S. (2020). *Social norms as a barrier to women's employment in developing countries* (No. w27449). National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and change*, 30(3), 435-464.
- Kabeer, N. (2005). Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of the third millennium development goal 1. *Gender & development*, 13(1), 13-24.
- Kabeer, N. (2016). Leaving no one behind": The challenge of intersecting inequalities. *ISSC, IDS and UNESCO, Challenging Inequalities: Pathways to a Just World, World Social Science Report*, 55-8.
- Kabeer, N. (2021). Gender equality, inclusive growth, and labour markets. In *Women's economic empowerment* (pp. 13-48). Routledge.
- Klotz, A., Prakash, D. (2008). *Qualitative methods in international relations* (pp. 1-7). Basingstoke [England]: Palgrave Macmillan. Pages 61-77 and 78-92.
- Kulkarni, S., Bhosale, P. A., Kausar, A., & Das, S. (2025). Addressing Gender Disparities: Enhancing Women's Representation and Equity Across Employment Sectors. In *Dimensions of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging in Business* (pp. 69-86). IGI Global Scientific Publishing.

- Kumar, S. (2024, January 31). *Elected Women Representatives in local rural governments in India: Assessing the impact and challenges*. orfonline.org. Retrieved from [\[https://www.orfonline.org/research/elected-women-representatives-in-local-rural-governments-in-india-assessing-the-impact-and-challenges\]](https://www.orfonline.org/research/elected-women-representatives-in-local-rural-governments-in-india-assessing-the-impact-and-challenges). [Accessed: 11 June 2025].
- Lim, W. M. (2025). What is qualitative research? An overview and guidelines. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 33(2), 199-229.
- Mahata, S., Khan, R. K., & Mandal, S. (2023). Dowry and Female Education: A Theoretical Evaluation. *The Pakistan Development Review*, 62(1), 41–60. Retrieved from [\[https://www.jstor.org/stable/27262085\]](https://www.jstor.org/stable/27262085).
- Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal (MASUM). (n.d.). MASUM Home page. Retrieved from [\[https://www.masum-india.org.in/about.html\]](https://www.masum-india.org.in/about.html). [Accessed: 11 June 2025].
- Ministry of Education (MoE). (2023). *National Education Policy*. Ministry of Education. Retrieved from [\[https://www.education.gov.in/nep/about-nep\]](https://www.education.gov.in/nep/about-nep).
- Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI). (2024). *Women & men in India 2024: Selected indicators and data*. Retrieved from [\[https://www.mospi.gov.in/publication/women-men-india-2024-selected-indicators-and-data\]](https://www.mospi.gov.in/publication/women-men-india-2024-selected-indicators-and-data).
- Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI). (2022). Employment indicators in India. In *Periodic Labour Force Survey Reports*. Retrieved from [\[https://dge.gov.in/dge/sites/default/files/2023-07/Employment\\_Indicators\\_in\\_India\\_since\\_2017-18\\_to\\_2021-22.pdf\]](https://dge.gov.in/dge/sites/default/files/2023-07/Employment_Indicators_in_India_since_2017-18_to_2021-22.pdf).
- Mir, A. H., & Swaroopa P. K. (2024). Women education in India: Issues and challenges. *International Journal of Emerging Knowledge Studies*. 3(5), 210-215.
- Nielsen, K. B., & Waldrop, A. (2014). Women and Gender in a Changing India. In A. Waldrop & K. B. Nielsen (Eds.), *Women, Gender and Everyday Social Transformation in India: A Revisionary History* (pp. 1–18). Anthem Press.
- Nunoo, J., Opoku, A., Coffie, M., Nsenkyire, E., & Mefful, J. (2024). Cognitive and non-cognitive skills' effect on labour market outcomes: a systematic review with implications for the African labour market. *Cogent Education*, 11(1).

- Nussbaum, M. C. (2000). *Women and human development: The capabilities approach* (Vol. 3). Cambridge university press.
- OECD. (2012). *Closing the Gender Gap: Act Now*. Retrieved from [[https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2012/12/closing-the-gender-gap\\_g1glf21e/9789264179370-en.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2012/12/closing-the-gender-gap_g1glf21e/9789264179370-en.pdf)].
- OECD. (2025). *Post-education labour market outcomes*. OECD. Retrieved from [<https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/post-education-labour-market-outcomes.html>].
- Patel, V. A. (2014). Educational Reforms and Women's Issues in Maharashtra. *Maharashtra Economic Development Council, Monthly Economic Digest*.
- Phillips, M. J. (2023). Towards a social constructionist, criticalist, Foucauldian-informed qualitative research approach: Opportunities and challenges. *SN Social Sciences*, 3(10).
- Press Information Bureau (PIB). (2021). *Policy to promote women empowerment*. Press Information Bureau, Government of India Ministry of Women and Child Development. <https://www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1776873>
- Riman, H. B., Lebo, M., Ude, O., & Akpan, E. S. (2023). Does women participation in governance reduce corruption and income inequality? Empirical investigation from Nigeria. *Global Journal of Social Sciences*, 22(1), 119-136.
- Robino, C., & Tebaldi, R. (2018). *Women at Work: Addressing the gaps*. Ipcid. Retrieved from [<https://ipcid.org/publications-ipc-ig-/women-at-work-addressing-the-gaps/>]. [Accessed: 11 June 2025].
- Robinson, C., & Pope, R. (2023). Minoritized individuals and knowledge-economy.
- Sen, A. (1999). Development as freedom. *The globalization and development reader: Perspectives on development and global change*, 525.
- Sen, A. (2006). Development as Freedom: An India Perspective. *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, 42(2), 157–169.
- Smile Foundation. (2023, August 16). *Women Empowerment through a Holistic Approach*. Retrieved from [<https://www.smilefoundationindia.org/blog/women-empowerment-through-a-holistic-approach/>].

Smith, H. K. (2025). Transforming Traditional Norms: Education and Mentorship Strategies to Challenge Patriarchal Structures.

Stromquist, N. P. (2002). Education as a means for empowering women. In *Rethinking empowerment* (pp. 22-38). Routledge.

Times of India. (2021, January 3). *Savitribai Phule: Pioneer of woman emancipation*. Retrieved from [<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/readersblog/missing-facts/savitribai-phulay-pioneer-of-woman-emanicipation-28793/>]. [Accessed: 11 June 2025].

Tocqueville, A. (1835). Government of the Democracy in America. *Democracy in America*.

UNESCO. (2023). *UNESCO's action in education*. UNESCO. Retrieved from [<https://www.unesco.org/en/education/action>].

UNICEF. (2019). *Education*. UNICEF India. Retrieved From [<https://www.unicef.org/india/what-we-do/educatio>]. [Accessed: 12 June 2025].

Verick, S. (2014). Women's labour force participation in India: why is it so low? *International Labor Organization*.

Vishwakarma, P., & Gupta, A. (2024). Encouraging women: unlocking the potential of Indian female labour force participation. *Economics and Commerce*, 15(01).

World Bank Group. (2024a). Women's & Girls' Empowerment. In *the World Bank*. Retrieved from [<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/gender/brief/womens-girls-empowerment>].

World Bank Group. (2024b). *India. World Bank Gender Data Portal*. Retrieved from [<https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/india>].

World Economic Forum. (2024). *Global Gender Gap Report 2024*. (2025, March 12). World Economic Forum. Retrieved From [<https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2024/>].

World Population Review. (2025). *Pune Population 2025*. World Population Review. Retrieved from [<https://worldpopulationreview.com/cities/india/pune#sources>].

## **APPENDIX I: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE (1)**

---

### **1. Demographics and Background**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_

**Surname:** \_\_\_\_

**Age:** \_\_\_\_

**Gender:** ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other

**Level of Education Completed:** ☐ No formal education ☐ Primary ☐ Secondary ☐ Higher Education ☐ informal education

**Current Occupation:** \_\_\_\_

**How many years have you been in this role?** \_\_\_\_

**Where do you live?** ☐ Urban ☐ Rural

**Marital Status:** ☐ Single ☐ Married ☐ Divorced/Widowed

**Languages Spoken:** \_\_\_\_

### **2. Education and Empowerment**

1. Can you tell me about your educational background and what motivated you to pursue education?
2. What challenges have you faced in accessing education? (Select all that apply)
  - ☐ **Financial constraints**
  - ☐ **Family opposition**
  - ☐ **Social norms**
  - ☐ **Lack of infrastructure**
  - ☐ **Other:** \_\_\_\_
3. How has access to education impacted your independence and decision-making ability?
4. Do you believe the education system in your region effectively supports women?  
☐ **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐ **Not sure**  
If no, why not? \_\_\_\_
5. What role has your family or community played in supporting or discouraging your education and leadership ambitions?
6. How do you think perceptions of women in education have changed over time in your community/village/society? \_\_\_\_

### **3. Leadership and Gender Roles**

7. Have you held a leadership position?  
☐ **Yes** ☐ **No**  
If yes, how did you come into this role? \_\_\_\_
8. What do you think are the main barriers women face in leadership positions? (Select up to 3)



- ☐ Gender bias
- ☐ Lack of role models
- ☐ Work-life balance issues
- ☐ Educational gaps
- ☐ Lack of networking opportunities
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_

9. How do you think perceptions of women in leadership have changed over time in your community/village/society? \_\_\_\_

#### **4. Caste, Class, and Cultural Norms**

10. Do caste and class influence a woman's opportunities in education and leadership?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, how? \_\_\_\_

11. Have you experienced or observed caste- or class-based discrimination in education or professional settings?

☐ Yes ☐ No

- If yes, can you provide an example? \_\_\_\_

#### **5. Policy and Systemic Barriers**

12. Which policies or reforms have positively impacted women in your community? \_\_\_\_

13. Where and what gaps do you see in current policies or programmes for promoting women's empowerment? \_\_\_\_

#### **6. Support Systems and Strategies**

14. What role do NGOs like MASUM play in supporting women's empowerment in your community? \_\_\_\_

15. Other than policies, what informal practices have influenced women's empowerment in your community? \_\_\_\_

16. Are there specific strategies or resources that you have found most helpful in overcoming challenges for women? \_\_\_\_

#### **7. Cultural Resistance and Backlash**

17. Have you faced any type of resistance from your family, peers, or community in pursuing any form of education and/or leadership roles?

**Education:** ☐ Yes ☐ No

**Leadership:** ☐ Yes ☐ No

- If yes, how did you navigate it/them? \_\_\_\_

18. What do you think are the main reasons for this resistance? (Select all that apply.)

- ☐ **Traditional gender roles**
- ☐ **Fear of social exclusion**
- ☐ **Economic dependence**
- ☐ **Other: \_\_**

## **8. Vision for Change**

19. What changes would you like to see in your community to promote gender equality in education and leadership positions? \_\_
20. How do you think schools, NGOs, and governments can work together effectively and concretely to better support women's empowerment? \_\_

## **9. Conclusion**

21. How has your perspective on leadership and empowerment evolved through your experiences over time? \_\_
22. What advice would you give to any women aspiring to leadership roles? \_\_

## **APPENDIX 2: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE**

### **VOLLEYBALL GIRLS (2)**

---

#### **1. Demographics and Background**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_

**Surname:** \_\_\_\_

**Age:** \_\_\_\_

**Gender:** ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other

**Level of Education Completed:** ☐ No formal education ☐ Primary ☐ Secondary ☐ Higher Education ☐ informal education

**Current Occupation:** \_\_\_\_

**How many years have you been in this role?** \_\_\_\_

**Where do you live?** ☐ Urban ☐ Rural

**Marital Status:** ☐ Single ☐ Married ☐ Divorced/Widowed

**Languages Spoken:** \_\_\_\_

#### **2. Education and Empowerment through Volleyball**

1. What motivated you to join the volleyball team, and how has the experience shaped you?
2. Have you faced any challenges in participating in sports, such as family expectations or societal norms?

#### **3. Leadership and Gender Roles in Sports**

3. Have you ever taken on a leadership role within your team? If so, how did it impact your confidence and decision-making?
4. What do you think are the biggest barriers girls face in becoming leaders in sports?

#### **4. Cultural and Social Norms**

5. Do you think girls in your community are equally encouraged to participate in sports compared to boys? Why or why not?
6. Have you ever experienced or witnessed gender bias in sports? If so, how did you respond?

#### **5. Support Systems and Strategies**

7. What role have your coach, school, or community played in supporting your participation in volleyball?
8. Are there any skills or lessons from volleyball that you feel have empowered you outside of sports?

#### **6. Vision for Change**

9. What changes would you like to see to encourage more girls to participate in sports?
10. What advice would you give to younger girls who want to play volleyball but may face obstacles?

## **APPENDIX 3: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE FGD (3)**

### **1. Demographics and Background**

Name: \_\_

Surname: \_\_

Age: \_\_

Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other

Level of Education Completed: ☐ No formal education ☐ Primary ☐ Secondary ☐ Higher Education ☐ informal education

Current Occupation: \_\_

How many years have you been in this role? \_\_

Where do you live? ☐ Urban ☐ Rural

Marital Status: ☐ Single ☐ Married ☐ Divorced/Widowed

Languages Spoken: \_\_

### **2. Introduction**

I am here to learn from your experiences regarding education, leadership, and gender roles in your community. There are no right or wrong answers; your perspectives will help me understand the real challenges and opportunities for women.

### **3. Opening Icebreaker**

1. Can each of you share something about your educational background or work, and what were the biggest challenges you faced?

*(Probe: financial issues, family restrictions, societal norms, school accessibility)*

### **4. Education & Empowerment**

2. How has education, or lack of it, influenced your independence and decision-making?

*(Probe: ability to handle finances, make family decisions, pursue work)*

3. What role have your family and community played in supporting or discouraging your education or work outside the home?

4. Have you noticed any changes in how families and communities view girls' education over time?

*(Probe: comparison between their generation and the younger generation)*

### **5. Gender Roles & Leadership**

5. Do you or any women in your village hold leadership roles (in family, community, or workplace)? What are the biggest challenges in taking on leadership roles?

*(Probe: examples of women in leadership, informal vs. formal roles, family expectations, lack of confidence, societal resistance)*

6. How do caste or class affect a woman's opportunities in education and leadership here?

7. How do men/other people in the community view women as leaders? Has this changed over time?

*(Probe: acceptance or resistance to women in decision-making)*

8. How do caste or class affect a woman's opportunities in education and leadership here?

## **6. Community Support & Policies**

9. What support systems, such as NGOs or government programmes and policies, have helped you?

*(Probe: MASUM's impact, government policies)*

10. Besides policies, what everyday practices in the village help or hinder women's progress?

*(Probe: informal networks, mentorship, traditions)*

11. What changes would you like to see to improve opportunities for women and girls in your village?

*(Probe: education, financial independence, men's role in gender equality)*

## **7. Conclusion**

12. If you could give advice to younger women in your village, what would it be?

## APPENDIX 4: CONSENT FORM ENGLISH AND MARATHI

### English Version:

**CONSENT LETTER**

I [redacted] am aware of the relevant person's educational thesis and research topic.

1) I am attending this interview voluntarily.

2) To sign my name to this study; I am...  
Ready ☒ Not ready ☐.

3) To proceed with recording the audio clip; I am...  
Ready ☒ Not ready ☐.

Sign: [redacted]

4) To proceed with recording the video clip; I am...  
Ready ☒ Not ready ☐.

Sign: [redacted]

5) I prefer not be recognized, but I allow to take photograph.  
Ready ☒ Not ready ☐.

Participant signature: [redacted]

**INTERVIEW'S**

DATE: 28/02/2025 DAY Friday PLACE MASUMI CHAPARS

Researcher's signature; Sara Ferrari

Researcher's Name: SARA FERRARI

## Marathi Version:

**सहभागी व्यक्तीचे संमतीपत्र**

मी [REDACTED]

संबंधित व्यक्तीच्या शैक्षणिक हेतुकारिता केल्या जाणाऱ्या संशोधनाच्या अभ्यासाच्या विषयाशी अवगत आहे .

१) मी स्वेच्छेने मुलाखत देत आहे.

२) माझे नाव अहवालामध्ये संमिलित करण्याकरिता माझी संमती ..!

आहे ☒ नाही ☐ सही [REDACTED]

३) ओडीओ रेकॉर्डिंग करण्याकरिता माझी संमती .....

आहे ☐ नाही ☒ सही [REDACTED]

४) व्हिडीओ रेकॉर्डिंग करण्याकरिता माझी संमती ....

आहे ☒ नाही ☐ सही [REDACTED]

५) चेहरा दिसणार नाही याची काळजी घेऊन फोटो काढण्यास माझी संमती

आहे ☒ नाही ☐ सही [REDACTED]

सहभागी व्यक्तीची सही : [REDACTED]

मुलाखतीचे

दिनांक : 10/02/2015 दिवस            ठिकाण :           .

संशोधकाची सही : Sara Ferrari

संशोधकाचे नाव : SARA FERRARI

### **APPENDIX 5: COMPLETE TABLE WITH SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF PARTICIPANTS**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Participant category</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Education Level</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Years (Occu)</b>	<b>Residence</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Languages Spoken</b>
1	MASUM Rural Staff (Saswad) and Volleyball Coach	26	Female	Higher Education	MASUM Staff/ Volleyball Coach	2	rural	married	Hindi, Marathi
2	MASUM Education Fellowship Program	19	Female	Higher Education	Fellowship Student	13	rural	single	Marathi, Hindi, English.
3	MASUM Education Fellowship Program	19	Female	Secondary Education	Fellowship Student	13	rural	single	Marathi, Hindi, English.
4	MASUM Rural Staff (Saswad)	28	Female	Secondary Education	MASUM Staff	5	rural	married	Hindi, Marathi
5	MASUM Empowerment Through Sport Program	13	Female	Primary Education	Student (Volleyball)	7	rural	single	Hindi, Marathi
6	MASUM Empowerment Through Sport Program	13	Female	Primary Education	Student (Volleyball)	7	rural	single	Hindi, Marathi
7	MASUM Rural Staff (Saswad)	28	Female	Secondary Education	MASUM Staff/ Head of Health program	3	urban	married	Marathi, Hindi, English.
8	MASUM Empowerment Through Sport Program	14	Female	Primary Education	Student (Volleyball)	8	rural	single	Hindi, Marathi
9	MASUM Empowerment Through Sport Program	14	Female	Primary Education	Student (Volleyball)	8	rural	single	Hindi, Marathi
10	MASUM Rural Staff (Saswad)	54	Female	Secondary	MASUM Staff Responsible	33	rural	married	Marathi



				Education	for Self-help groups and property rights				
11	MASUM Education Fellowship Program	16	Female	Secondary Education	Fellowship Student	10	rural	single	Hindi, Marathi
12	MASUM Education Fellowship Program	23	Female	Higher Education	Fellowship Student/Participant in Youth Program	17	rural	single	Hindi, Marathi, English
13	MASUM Education Fellowship Program	20	Female	Higher Education	Fellowship Student	14	rural	single	Hindi, Marathi
14	Youth Program	21	Female	Higher Education	Student/Viveki Yuva Manch (YVM) Program	15	rural	single	Hindi, Marathi, English
15	Youth Program (FGD1)	19	Female	Higher Education	Student/Yuva Gat (YG) Program	13	rural	single	Hindi, Marathi, English
16	Youth Program (FGD1)	19	Female	Higher Education	Student/Yuva Gat (YG) Program	13	urban	single	Hindi, Marathi
17	MASUM Rural Staff (Saswad)	35	Female	Secondary Education	MASUM Staff Head Psychologist/Counseling	6	suburban	married	Hindi, Marathi
18	Village Women (FGD2)	42	Female	Secondary Education	Office Messenger	4	rural	married	Hindi, Marathi
19	Village Women (FGD2)	38	Female	Primary Education	Member of Village Council	5	rural	married	Hindi, Marathi
20	Village Women (FGD2)	40	Female	Primary Education	Farmer	20	rural	married	Hindi, Marathi
21	Village Women (FGD2)	41	Female	Upper-Primary Education	Housewife	25	rural	married	Hindi, Marathi
22	MASUM Urban Staff (Pune-Hadapsar)	31	Female	Higher Education	MASUM Staff & Project Officer for GBV	3	urban	single	Hindi, Marathi, English
23	MASUM Urban Staff (Pune-Hadapsar)	22	Female	Higher Education	MASUM Staff	2	urban	single	Hindi, Marathi
24	MASUM Urban Staff (Pune-Hadapsar)	28	Female	Higher Education	MASUM Staff	2	urban	single	Hindi, Marathi, English

## APPENDIX 6: KEY FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

---

Participant group	Key Barriers	Consequences	Opportunities/Recommendations
MASUM Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Caste-based exclusion in schools</li> <li>- Lack of gender-sensitive pedagogy</li> <li>- Financial insecurity among families.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High dropout rates</li> <li>- Reinforcement of gendered roles</li> <li>- Early marriages due to financial pressures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Expand education fellowship programme to even more girls</li> <li>- Policy and advocacy for inclusive school environments</li> </ul>
MASUM Education Fellowship Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Domestic responsibilities limit study time</li> <li>- Parental pressure to marry</li> <li>- Poor transport/safety in rural areas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Disrupted education pathways</li> <li>- Mental health stress</li> <li>- Reduced employment options</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Peer mentorship and counseling</li> <li>- Increase of government Scholarships for girls</li> <li>- Gender-sensitive family engagement</li> </ul>
MASUM Empowerment Sport Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Resistance to girls' participation in public spaces</li> <li>- Gender stereotypes reinforced at school</li> <li>- Pressure to prioritize domestic chores or support family labour</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Poor confidence and self-image</li> <li>- No long-term educational planning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Empowerment through sports</li> <li>- Infrastructure (safe space for girls)</li> <li>- Life skills and leadership workshops</li> </ul>
Young Married Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Marriage pressure</li> <li>- Caste hierarchy</li> <li>- Social stigma</li> <li>- Lack of family support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Forced dropout rates</li> <li>- Loss of peer network</li> <li>- Emotional isolation</li> <li>- Reduced access to employment and leadership roles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Anti-child marriage campaigns</li> <li>- Bridge courses for re-entry into education post marriage.</li> <li>- Mentorship to support women in entering the labour market and leadership roles.</li> </ul>
Youth Programme Girls FGD 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gendered restriction on mobility and time use</li> <li>- Parental pressure to focus on domestic duties</li> <li>- Lack of awareness about non-traditional career paths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limited exposure to leadership or decision-making opportunities</li> <li>- Low confidence and self-expression</li> <li>- Education seen as secondary to family responsibilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Community workshop to build support for girls' aspirations</li> <li>- Expansion of structured youth engagement programmes</li> <li>- Creative platform to foster voice and agency</li> </ul>
Village Women FGD 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limited access to quality schooling</li> <li>- Discrimination based on caste</li> <li>- Lack of career guidance and role models</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Girls confined to unpaid care roles</li> <li>- Informal labour entry</li> <li>- Lack of aspiration building</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mobile career camp</li> <li>- Training for teachers on caste and gender sensitivity</li> <li>- Teacher's training to increase quality curriculum</li> </ul>

## APPENDIX 7: PARTICIPANTS CATEGORIES

---

Participant Category	Number of Participants	Notes
Rural Staff MASUM (Saswad)	5	Involved in program coordination/implementation and grassroots outreach.
Urban Staff MASUM (Hadapsar – Pune)	3	Responsible for headquarters administrative and organisational tasks, coordinating and planning projects and programmes.
MASUM Education Fellowship Programme	5	Participants who received a fully funded scholarship for education from MASUM are part of the program.
MASUM Empowerment Through Sport Programme	4	Young girls from secondary schools taking part in the sport-based empowerment program from MASUM.
‘Yuva Manch’ Youth Platform / ‘Yuva Gat’ Youth Group	3 (2p for FGD1)	Young volunteers create workshops on various topics and organise meetings to discuss and solve youth issues, which they then raise with the local municipality.
Village Women	4 (FGD2)	Rural women from Udachiwadi village shared local lived experiences. Although they are not directly involved with MASUM, they have observed the organisation's work in their village over time.
Total	24	

## APPENDIX 8: MAIN BARRIERS WOMEN FACE IN ACCESSING LABOUR MARKET AND LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

Barrier	Participants (N)	Illustrative Quotes
Caste-based discrimination	21	<i>"Gender always matters, but caste adds another layer. If a woman is from SCs, people will judge not just for being a woman but for her caste too."</i> (Participant 24, age 28, personal communication, February 28, 2025).
Gender Bias	18	<i>"Even if a woman is Sarpanch<sup>15</sup>, sometimes her husband will take the decisions."</i> (Participant 12, age 23, personal communication, February 18, 2025).
Lack of role-models	13	<i>"There is no recognition for women role models in society, even if there are many strong, educated, independent women out there."</i> (Participant 1, age 26, personal communication, February 5, 2025).
Work-life balance issues	12	<i>"I work at the office, help my father with farming, and attend college."</i> (Participant 14, age 21, personal communication, February 20, 2025).
Educational gaps	11	<i>"Boys have long had better access to education, especially in rural areas, leaving girls with fewer skills and confidence to step into leadership."</i> (Participants 18-21 FGD2, age 40-45, personal communication, February 22, 2025)
Lack of networking opportunities	10	<i>"Boys develop stronger professional and social networks than girls because they are encouraged to go out and be more socially active and build networks from a young age."</i> (Participants 15-16 FGD1, ages 19, personal communication, February 20, 2025).
Other (social pressure, low self-esteem, male domination of symbolic roles)	6	<i>"Girls doubt themselves before even asking parents for permission."</i> (Participant 6, age 13, personal communication, February 10, 2025).

<sup>15</sup> Sarpanch: head of the village council.

## APPENDIX 9: PHOTOS (A SELECTION WITHOUT PARTICIPANTS TO PRESERVE ANONYMITY)

---

MASUM RURAL OFFICE (SASWAD) – planning of interviews with focal point, interpreter, coach.



ROOM WHERE I CONDUCTED MOST INTERVIEWS

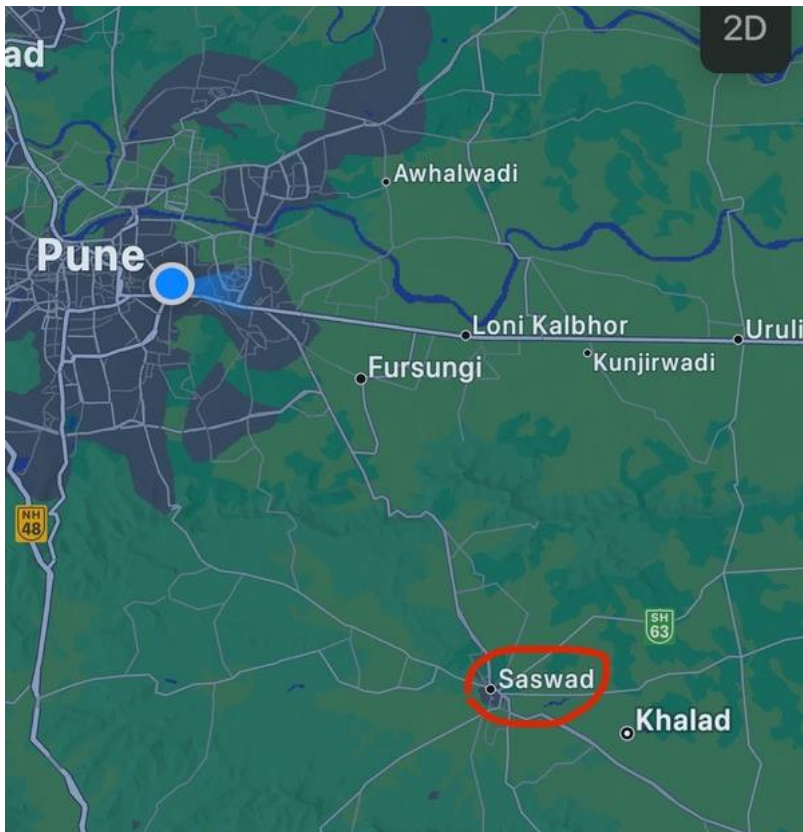




## SECONDARY SCHOOL IN KHALAD – SASWAD



## MAP THAT SHOWS PUNE CITY AND SASWAD DISTANCE



## STREETS OF SASWAD



## PUNE CITY – HADAPSAR OFFICE (LUNCH TIME) WITH STAFF





VIEWS FROM THE ROAD TO GO TO RURAL OFFICE

