'I have the confidence to ask': Thickening agency among adolescent girls in Karnataka, South India

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Abstract

Gender norms serve to normalise gender inequalities and constrain girls' agency. This paper examines how girls' agency, along a continuum, is influenced by the interplay with both constraining and enabling influences in the girl's environments. We analyse data from a qualitative study nested within a cluster randomised evaluation of *Samata*, a multi-layered programme supporting adolescent girls to stay in school and delay marriage in Karnataka, South India. Specifically, we compare agency among 22 girls from intervention communities and 9 girls in control communities using data from the last round of interviews in a qualitative cohort. Using the concept of 'thin' and 'thick' agency on a continuum, we identified shocks like mothers' death or illness, poverty stress, gender norms and poor school performance as thinning influences. Good school examination results; norms in support of education; established educational aspirations; supportive parents, siblings and teachers; and strategic government and *Samata* resources enabled thicker agency. The intervention programme's effect increased in parallel to the gradient from thin to thicker agency among girls in progressively supportive family contexts. Engagement with the programme was however selective; families adhering to harmful gender norms were not receptive to outreach. In line with diffusion theory, late adopters require additional peer encouragement to change norms.

Keywords: agency, adolescent girls, gender norms, interventions, India

Introduction

Achieving gender equality and ensuring inclusive education are central to the 2030 agenda for sustainable development (SDG 2015). For most pupils, secondary school coincides with early adolescence, a period when young people receive strong cues about appropriate gender behaviour and become more sensitive to peer acceptance (Kagesten et al. 2016). This developmental stage also represents a window of opportunity for individuals to develop self-efficacy and agency to contest restrictive gender norms and sow the seeds of gender equity (Lundgren et al. 2013). This paper sheds light on how girls' agency is either constrained or facilitated by their environment in the context of *Samata,* a programme designed to keep south Indian adolescent girls in school and delay marriage (Beattie et al. 2015).

Our findings derive from a longitudinal qualitative study nested within a cluster randomised impact evaluation of the *Samata* programme. The overarching trial found no community level impact of the programme on girls' entry or completion of secondary school or on the proportion of girls married under 18. Any effect of the intervention itself was overshadowed by large secular reductions in the background levels of child marriage and school dropout, catalysed by government policies and programmes targeting these same outcomes (Beattie et al. 2020). An analysis of the nested qualitative study mid-way through the trial found high parental aspirations for girl's education, consistent with an emerging trend towards secondary school completion. Nonetheless, an important minority of girls dropped out of school and/or were married off early as poverty combined with concerns about protecting the daughter's sexual 'purity', led parents to secure her well-being through early marriage. Girls who were frequently absent from school were identified as 'at risk of drop-out', given that missing classes often preceded actual withdrawal (Ramanaik et al. 2018).

This paper explores agency among three different groups: 1) girls who dropped out before completing 10th standard (trial outcome); 2) girls who frequently missed school when they were in 9th standard (age 14-15) but overcame challenges to complete secondary school; and 3) girls who had not experienced any prolonged or frequent interruptions to their schooling. We compare girls in control versus intervention villages throughout and explore whether and in what way intervention resources might enable agency among girls.

Samata *intervention*

Samata is a comprehensive, multi-level intervention programme that worked with girls and their families, boy peers, schoolteachers, community members and leaders (http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/projects/samata-keeping-girls-secondary-school). The 5-year programme started work in January 2013 and reached about 3600 low caste adolescent girls and 1800 families in 119 villages and 69 high schools in Bijapura and Bagalkot districts in northern Karnataka. These districts have been characterised by high levels of HIV among women involved in the tradition of *devadasi* sex work (dedicated to temples at young ages). Their daughters in turn are perceived at especially high risk of school dropout and therefore were a target group for the intervention (Beattie et al. 2019).

The *Samata* project deployed outreach workers who were extensively trained on communication, counselling, and life skills education. Each mentored 90 to 130 adolescent girls from 3 to 4 villages and led a series of girl-only workshops designed to build confidence and encourage reflection on prevailing gender practices. These life skills and leadership workshops were based on the *parivartan* model developed for young people living in poor

urban settlements in Mumbai (ICRW 2014). Outreach workers visited participants' homes on a regular basis and worked closely with both parents and their daughters. The aim of these home visits was to help families with issues that could limit girls' school attendance; emphasise to parents the importance of investing in girls' education and delaying marriage; and assist families in accessing various government entitlement schemes. Outreach workers met every girl at least once a month and conducted group and one-on-one counselling sessions with parents. To change discriminatory gender norms at a community level, girls and other community members organised street theatre performances and community discussions (Beattie et al. 2015).

Theoretical perspective

The study employed social cognitive theory and its model of emergent interactive agency, to transcend the structure-agency dualism (Giddens 1984) and assess the extent to which factors at the individual, interpersonal, community and structural levels mediate adolescent girls' agency regarding early marriage and school attendance. Bandura defines agency as an individual's intentionality and forethought, self-regulation and self-reflectiveness about their capabilities, and the meaning and purpose of their life pursuits (Bandura 2001). Early conceptualisations of agency in the field of gender and development were transformative in abandoning the notion of non-Western women as passive and submissive. However, because all people operate within contexts and structures that are frequently organised according to inequitable gendered norms and expectations, the level to which agency can be equated with 'empowerment' or 'transformative agency' is widely debated, and feminist authors contest the notion that agency is inherently subversive or emancipatory. Indeed, girls and women can exercise agency to serve their own interest and agendas, in ways that nonetheless reproduce gender inequalities (Kathy 2007; McNay 2000). Pereira emphasises that at times feminists privilege forms of agency that subvert or resist hegemonic discourse at the expense of other forms of agency (Pereira 2014). To resist falling into this trap, the authors return to structuration theory (Giddens 1984), to explore the multiple ways in which individuals can act as an autonomous agent, both resisting and being constrained by the environment around them.

Structuration theory (Giddens 1984), acknowledges a 'continuum of agency', in which an individual's agency can be 'thinned' or 'thickened', over time and space, as various structures, contexts and relationships either 'erode' or 'layer' their range of viable choices (Giddens 1984). Individuals have thick agency, in situations when they can act within a broad range of options, or thin agency when their actions and decisions are constrained by an environment with few alternatives (Robson, Bell and Klocker 2007; Klocker 2007). This provides a useful means to conceptualise the responses of adolescent girls to the social, cultural, economic and environmental influences that shape their lives. It provides opportunities to identify moments where young people's agency is already thick, and where it can be thickened through strategic intervention (Bell 2012). This might include moments of 'subtle' or thin agency, where girls' agency is constrained by their interactions with parents, family, or community members (Klocker 2007; Robson, Bell and Klocker 2007). In these moments of thin agency, girls may nonetheless be able to achieve profound positive changes to their lives, without necessarily subverting or resisting gender inequitable hegemonic discourses, thereby avoiding dissent from their families and communities (Bell 2012).

Materials and methods

Study design, sampling and data collection

Data was collected during the last round of interviews from a longitudinal qualitative cohort among 36 scheduled caste and scheduled tribe girls followed for 3 years from the first year of secondary school (8th grade at age 13-14) until after school completion (10th standard at age 15-16). Sampling was purposive from the trial survey listing, based on age, academic performance, socio-economic status, and whether or not the mother was a *devadasi* sex worker. We aimed to interview 26 girls in intervention communities and 10 girls in control communities three times: baseline when girls were 13-14 years old; midline at age 14-15 years, and from March to May 2017 when they were 16-17 years old. This paper is informed by last round data collection, but is supplemented with contextual information on educational constraints from previous rounds and the analysis of the first 2 rounds presented elsewhere (Ramanaik et al. 2018). In the final round, 31 respondents were interviewed, 3 refused consent and 2 were lost to follow-up as they had married and joined their husband's family.

All interviews were conducted in a place of the girl's choice. We used semi-structured topic guides, individually tailoring each interview to the information revealed in the previous round of interviewing. We used participatory lifeline tools to aid recall and focus the conversation on important and potentially sensitive issues (Ramanaik et al. 2018). Interview topics included participants' views on school attendance and environment; events and circumstances interfering with attendance; school absence; support from relatives and school; burden of household chores; and norms around menarche, marriage, gendered mobility and teasing. We explored girls' understanding of perceived changes since the last interview without explicitly mentioning the intervention. After allowing spontaneous responses, we probed specifically on intervention exposure. Interviews took on average 90 minutes.

Four female field staff interviewed the girls, following intensive five-day training on research ethics, qualitative research methodologies, interview tools and interviewing techniques. During the training, tools were field-tested and the wording and structure refined. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and then translated into English. The first and third authors reviewed all translated transcripts against the digital audio files for accuracy and completeness of the data.

Data analysis

We conducted a cross-sectional analysis of the endline interviews. Thematic content analysis was supplemented by narrative analysis (Shukla et al. 2014) to examine how instances of agency were constructed and contradicted in girls' accounts of various constraining and enabling influences in her family context. We used NVivo 11 for data management (QSR 2011) supplemented with thematic spreadsheet summaries of previous interview rounds to review prevailing challenges in family context and in school attendance. We constantly compared narratives from control and intervention girls, distinguishing among the latter between those who had participated in the intervention and those who had not. Using pseudonyms to protect confidentiality, we facilitate interpretation by using group identifiers after each name: -C for girls from control communities, -SP for girls who participated in the *Samata* intervention, and -SNP for girls in the intervention communities who had not participated.

Throughout, girls' narratives are incorporated into the text to represent their individual everyday realities.

Ethical considerations

Written informed consent was obtained from parents and assent from girls. Anonymity was maintained by using a unique study identifier to distinguish individual participants. The institutional review boards at St. Johns Medical College, Bangalore; the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine; and the University of Manitoba reviewed and approved the study. The trial was registered at clinicaltrials.gov - NCT01996241 (Beattie et al. 2015).

Results

All 31 girls were 16 or 17 years old at the time of interview, 5 girls had left school before completing secondary school and 2 were married. Among the 22 girls from intervention communities, 19 girls participated in *Samata* and 3 did not (despite the interventions team's repeated attempts to involve them and their families). Nine girls came from control communities.

Group 1: Agency and family contexts among girls who dropped out of school before sitting 10th standard examination

Five girls dropped out of school before sitting their 10th standard school examination, only one of which was from the control area. The 3 non-participant girls had dropped out by midline while Reema-C and Rupam-SP were considered at risk of dropout at the time. Interestingly, all five participants claimed some level of responsibility for the decision to leave school. Some even presented this decision in opposition to their parents' wishes, claiming they encouraged them to stay at school. Reema-C shared: 'My father used to tell me to study, but I left school. So, I alone am responsible for my present position'. Ishani-SNP said her father had encouraged her to go back to school, sharing '"You are saying you will leave, you should go to school!" He scolded me [but] I left [school]'. However, on further consideration, both girls were forced to make these decisions in a highly constrained environment.

Only one girl (Arya-SNP) who dropped out in 8th standard clearly described arguing with her parents to stay in school before she eventually left: 'It was an entire year my parents used to scold me when I used to go to school'. She also described hiding her parent's lack of support for her education from her friends: 'If there [was work to do at home], I did not go to school. I felt bad I didn't go to school. If my friends asked me to come to school, then I used to say I am not feeling like coming to school'. She claimed her big achievement was succeeding in preventing her younger sister's early marriage, making her family members admit '"Yes we performed your marriage when you were young and we made a mistake and spoiled your life. We will not do like that for her". They did not perform her marriage'.

The pressure to get married from parents and extended families clearly contributed to school dropout for some girls. Like Arya-SNP, Vansha-SNP got married to her maternal uncle, which happened suddenly in 9th class. Her parents, who refused to participate in the intervention, were seemingly motivated by fear of damage to their reputation and did not have high educational aspirations for their daughters. Describing her engagement to a paternal cousin, Ishani-SNP said 'When they came to [organise the engagement] I said:

"whatever you say". They said yes, I also said yes'. Despite suggesting that her father encouraged her education, she also shared: '[My father] said: "let it be, keep quiet. It is among relatives"'.

Girls also described dropping out of school due to responsibilities for domestic labour. This was exacerbated for two girls due to ill-health/death of their mothers. Ishani-SNP described her increased responsibility for her younger siblings following her *devadasi* mother's death: 'I did not feel like going to school seeing everything (that needed doing) in the house'. Similarly, Rupam-SP said that leaving school was 'an unavoidable choice', once her mother (also *devadasi*) had become seriously ill. Before dropping out, she had missed school regularly to assist her mother, or earn money herself.

Bullying and harassment from teachers and students contributed to several girls' decision to drop out of school. Arya-SNP described how 'if the uniform is dirty that day, I didn't feel like going to school because teachers used to scold'. Reema-C joined a new school in 9th standard where she was bullied by other children: 'because I am fat I had to leave school … in school everyone used to say you are fat, you are fat. I felt ashamed so I left'. Ishani-SNP described fear of reputational damage following harassment from boys in her school: 'there was one boy who said something to [girl in my class] and she was sitting and crying. Then I felt that if it happens [to me], my father will lose his respect and I left [school]'. This heightened fear of reputational damage for her father, may be explained by her complex home situation, whereby following the death of her mother, a *devadasi* and her father's lover, she and her three younger siblings live with her father's wife and their children.

Group 2: Agency among girls who overcame the challenge of frequently missing school in earlier years

Apart from the 2 girls (Reema-C and Rupam-SP) described above, the 7 other girls who were identified as a risk of dropout at midline, all completed secondary school and 5 of them are now in college, despite having missed school frequently during 9th standard. There appeared to be little difference in constraining and enabling influences on girls at risk of drop out in both intervention versus control communities. Several girls mentioned adverse family contexts, including alcohol abuse (Adweta-SP), fights between parents (Adweta-SP, Saira-C) or between mothers and brothers (Ridhi-SP), and pressure for girls to take part in domestic tasks (Ridhi-SP, Adweta-SP, Hiral-SP), family's fears of girls' reputational damage (Saira-C), and caring for younger siblings and working in the fields during holidays (Hiral-SP).

Yet among those who completed secondary school, there were enabling factors too, with most parents clearly prioritising their daughters' education during 10th standard, with girls often released from housework, especially during examination times. Teachers also were seen as more supportive during this crucial examination year. Four girls (Adweta-SP, Hiral-SP, Jhanvi-C, Saira-C) benefited from Government scholarships. Dhriti-SP and Hiral-SP had taken up *Samata* tutorial classes, while Nitara-C had been offered tutorial classes by her teacher, which she did not take up.

Interestingly, girls in this group described going to great lengths to ensure they could remain in school. Adweta-SP describes disobeying her mother by staying behind after school to study or going to a friend's house 'because at home they gave me a lot of trouble'. Jhanvi-C shared: 'I sat at night and studied … I got up at 4 in the morning and I used to study till 5…. I studied in school too. When [other students] left to play I used to sit and study'. Once she had finished school, she borrowed the money for college admission from her brother in law:

‘My parents said if we had money we would educate you […] I wanted to study, I was stubborn and said send me to college. I borrowed money and went to college’. Saira-C persuaded her family to trust that she was not having a relationship with a boy on her way home from school, and to allow her to stay in school and avoid marriage: ‘[I told them] “I simply go to school and come home’... They wanted me to leave. I started to cry. I did not eat for two days, I said have faith in me. I convinced them’. She also recounts how she studied in secret in the evening and once she excelled in her 10th examination, it was easy to convince her parents to study further.

Poor school performance, however, acted as a significant constraint on staying in school to graduation. Despite her efforts to study with little support at home, Adweta-SP shared that she panicked in her final examinations, and blamed herself for failing: ‘I did not have enough brains to study… I decided by myself [not to retake my exams] and then told my father […] I feel it was my mistake not to go to school. I feel I should suffer for what I have done and keep quiet’. This quote shows the impact her poor examination results had on her state of mind and lack of confidence in her abilities. However, successful examination performance was not always sufficient to ensure continued education. Ridhi-SP expressed little hope to progress to college even though she passed with low marks: ‘They did not get me admission. They kept quiet and I also did not say I want to get admission’. Her older brother had persuaded her mother, a *devadasi* whom she describes as mentally unstable, to not let her go to college and he had rejected home visits from the *Samata* team.

Some girls aimed to overcome the challenges they faced by seeking help from others. Dhriti-SP could not pay admission to college as her mother was sick and ‘it became serious’ and her treatment was expensive. She had desperately wanted to study, so she shared her troubles with her favourite teacher: ‘He said “you should manage according to the condition of your house, you are five of you, and only your mother is working and earning, so don’t feel bad”. He made me feel happy’.

These girls’ efforts to stay in education appear to come at some costs. Jhanvi-C now felt conflicted as family poverty still weighed as a big constraint on her decision. She explained her dilemma: ‘They are poor and we are building a house and so I don’t know if I should continue [college] or not... I wish to study [but] if I look at the condition of my house I feel, I don’t want to’. This quote clarifies that when individual self-interest is not perceived to be aligned with the welfare of the family, girls find it difficult to prioritise themselves. Hiral-SP described both powerful protective and equally constraining factors with her parents’ strong commitment to education:

> ‘They send me to college and they didn’t listen to other people to make me leave school. They had the objective that our children should study further, so they sent me. They felt children will stand on their own feet and then they will become wise people in the society and lead life’.

She also described how her parents went to work in Maharashtra for 6 months a year. When they do, she carefully schedules her time between schoolwork, housework and caring for her 3 younger siblings. She benefited from tuition classes provided by *Samata* and was identified to participate in community advisory board meetings because of her leadership qualities. The interviewer noted that while she laughed and talked during midline data collection, at endline, there was no smile on her face, perhaps showing the strain she was under.

Changing beliefs about education and expectations regarding the age at which girls should marry were present in both intervention and control communities. While Dhriti-SP commended *Samata* outreach for influencing her parents, Jhanvi-C observed that it was her own mother's regret at marrying her first daughter too young that prompted her change of heart: 'My mother is suffering for that. She was scolded in the hospital … they took her [eldest daughter] for [pregnancy] scanning…. They scolded "she is still so small; why did you perform her marriage so early?"'. Among these seven girls, Saira-C is the only one currently engaged, seemingly against her will and in response to her parents concern about her reputation: 'At first I said no, but when I said no, they stopped talking to me'. However, Saira-C shared that her parents had agreed to delay her marriage until after 18 since her uncle in Bangalore was a policeman and her parents feared retribution. Girls whose marriage plan had not been discussed yet did not want to get involved in choosing a partner. As Ridhi-SP stated 'whoever is the choice of my family is my choice'. Most girls said they trusted their families to ask their approval and consent once a potential boy had been selected.

Group 3: Agency among girls from backgrounds with strong educational aspirations

Fourteen intervention participants and 5 control girls completed secondary school and 17 enrolled in college. All clearly displayed educational aspirations and did not have a history of school absence. Six girls in this group had *devadasi* backgrounds, with 2 of them retaking their 10^{th} examinations in order to continue to college. Suhani-SP was motivated to join her friends at college and her mother emphasised how it would help her employment opportunities and future: 'My mother said "you study nicely and then you'll get a job. Then we will find you a husband who has a job. If you leave school, then we will have to marry you off to a labourer"'. So, I said I would study'. Ahana-SP was motivated by the fact that her older sister was at university although she was the only girl in this group who felt that the heavy burden of household chores had adversely affected her performance in school. Amaya-C also struggled with chores during examination time but asked her grandmother for help. Meher-SP noted 'when I was in 10th they did not make me do any work', which was also noted by other girls.

There was little evidence of poverty stress in this group and few experienced constraining influences on their studies: there was little mention of alcohol affecting households and only one girl (Isha-C) mentioned parental fights which seemed to centre on her mother's lack of support for her education. The exception was Nisha-SP who had started college but was forced to drop out when her elder sister came home to deliver her baby. Nisha-SP refused to eat for four days to protest having to leave school, but this proved ineffective: 'So they said if you don't eat you die, we won't send you to college… so I kept quiet. I felt very upset at that time'. Nisha-SP knew that the real but unspoken reason that she was made to leave school was her mother's concern that a boy who liked her and had teased her three years previously, was now taking the same bus to college. Nisha-SP did seek help from the outreach worker and other more senior *Samata* staff: 'They came to my house three or four times to tell, but no one listened… I did everything, I stopped eating, I left everything and I stopped doing the housework, I left everything, it was of no use. I said I will die also; they did not agree'. None of her efforts or threats could change her mother's mind, who was one of the community members who policed young girls' behaviour and tackled what was deemed inappropriate behaviour, which included boys teasing girls.

Protective factors that enabled girls from intervention communities to continue their education included norms in support of education, teachers' support, tutorial classes,

government entitlements and scholarships, and support from the *Samata* team. All the girls found teachers supportive. As Zara-SP expressed, 'Teachers teach lessons nicely, everything they explain nicely. They treat everyone in the same way'. Eleven of 14 *Samata* participants but only 1 of 5 girls in the control communities, benefited from a government scholarship. Saanvi-SP explained how scholarship money was being used for household as well as educational expenses: 'When I get a scholarship, I don't keep it with me and I give it to them [parents]. So, it was helpful for them at the moment and when I need it, they give it to me'. She also credited the *Samata* outreach worker with helping convince her parents to allow her to continue studying after 10th standard.

Since education was prioritised in this group, there was little mention or conflict around girls' marriage. Two girls (Shravya-SP and Meher-SP) attributed a change in their parents' attitudes to the *Samata* programme. As Shravya-SP observed, 'Father and mother used to plan my marriage and I used to feel scared… I didn't say anything …. Now after joining I have got confidence. So, I talk to them, I tell them I will study further; don't perform my marriage so soon. I have the confidence to ask why'. As with the previous group, these girls did not expect to be involved in the process of finding a husband. Aaliya-C expressed a widely held perspective: 'They will not involve me in that, they will search for a boy and then after searching they will ask do you like the boy or not'.

Girls from both intervention and control arms of the study showed an awareness that child marriage is punishable by law. Fear of legal action was mentioned by *Samata* participants as a reason for delaying marriage. But even girls in control communities were aware that they had rights. As Kashvi-C noted, in the unlikely event her family would demand she marry, 'then I will give police complaint that they are doing child marriage forcefully'.

Some participants took action on behalf of friends or relatives. As Raveena-SP described,

> 'My grandfather was about to perform a child marriage of his granddaughter [her cousin]. I told him that it is wrong it should not be done. I educated the girl and her family members and mentioned the punishment by law for those who perform child marriages. They finally postponed her marriage and decided to do it once she is older'.

Girls who acted as members of the community advisory board took pride in helping to prevent school dropout and early marriage. As Naira-SP shared, 'sometime back here in our village, there was a girl who was studying in class 8. Her family planned her marriage even though she was underage… Then we together with the help of *Angawadi* teacher and *Samata* team called the police and cancelled the marriage'.

'Suspicion' and fears of reputational loss nonetheless remained important constraints for girls and could lead to sudden college dropout (as happened for Nisha-SP) and hasten marriage. *Samata* encouraged more open conversations about these fears. Participants noted the value of outreach workers assuaging parents' fears around girls' safety in public spaces and giving them confidence in their daughter's ability to remain safe. Meher-SP told how she was not previously allowed to go anywhere:

> 'My parents used to monitor where I sit, whom I talk to ... I used to feel bad. But now things have changed…especially, after [outreach worker] training … she said, just because we are girls, we should not lose our freedom. Wherever boys have the freedom to go, girls too have the freedom to go … I started discussing this with my

parents and I started going out. [outreach worker] has also discussed this with my parents … [now] they don't feel scared to send me anywhere'.

Participants also spoke of the importance of the outreach worker facilitating change through detailed and in-depth discussion with parents and daughters.

When asked about restrictions on movement, *Samata* participants recalled how they had discussed and negotiated mobility with their parents. In contrast, the question was poorly understood by control girls. Mahika-C typified this by claiming 'I can go anywhere', and not perceiving it as an issue. Later, she clarified that she can go out 'if there is any work, but they say don't go alone, take someone along and go'. Aaliya-C's brother did not let her go anywhere and said: 'don't roam around, you sit in the house, now people are also not good, people look with bad eyes'.

Discussion

This study illustrates girls' agency along a continuum, defined by an interplay between constraining or thinning influences and enabling or thickening factors in the girl's environment. Agency thinned when daughters had to take over domestic and caring duties, in the context of adverse family relations, when the family suffered poverty stress or when suspicion surfaced that a girl liked or was being teased by a boy. Agency thickened with good school performance and examination results; supportive parents, siblings and relatives; evolving social norms in support of girls' education; established educational aspirations; increased awareness of laws about girls' marriage; support from teachers and friends; government entitlements and scholarships; and engagement with *Samata*.

Girls who dropped out of school early (Group 1), normally did so after shocks to the family, such as illness or death of a parent, severe financial difficulties, or incidents that could potentially compromise the girl's and family's reputation. These shocks were often compounded by the underlying constraints that girls faced. Several girls were forced to drop from school and get married out of family necessity, placing them at the thin end of the agency continuum (Robson, Bell and Klocker 2007). Only Reema-C who was bullied by her peers chose to drop out of school against her father's advice, to avoid further bullying. She demonstrated personal constrained agency to protect herself in the short term, even though she forfeited completing secondary school, a potentially more empowering choice in the long-term (McNay 2000). This example speaks directly to the theory that girls and women can exercise agency to serve their own interest and agendas, in ways that nonetheless reproduce gendered inequalities.

All girls in Group 1 attempted to portray themselves as having some agency by describing their school leaving as their own decision, despite the lack of control and resignation illustrated in their narratives. Claiming responsibility for decisions seemed to give them a sense of power over their situation. A similar dynamic has been observed among child domestic workers in rural Tanzania (Klocker 2007). Although four of the five girls who dropped out of school resided in intervention communities, only one had actually participated in the intervention. The others were prevented from participating in *Samata* because the programme's aims went against their parents' beliefs. As shown in a previous analysis, girls who were already married by midline were from families who believed that early marriage could protect their daughters' safety and respectability, in contrast to the emerging trend of achieving respectability through education (Ramanaik et al. 2018).

Most girls in Group 2 who enrolled in college had to overcome challenges due to earlier interruptions in their studies. These girls complemented their desire to remain in school with discipline and personal agency (Bandura 2001). Some girls spoke of studying in secret, or out of parents' sight, and thereby acting in a subversive way. Robson, Bell and Klocker (2007) describes this as reactive agency, denoting subtle resistance to their parents' expectations. Most parents supported their daughter's education and recognised the importance of the 10th standard examination by enabling the girl to study. The willingness of mothers and siblings to take over housework greatly thickened their agency.

By contrast, poor examination performance was found to thin girls' agency. Ridhi-SP did not even attempt to negotiate with her brothers and mother to get admission to college. Adweta-SP who failed her examinations took the blame for the results, taking it as a personal failure without understanding the patriarchal social relationships that frame socially sanctioned inequities in the first place and which constrained her ability to study. The outcomes of thinned agency had a direct personal effect on emotions (Bell 2012) with a loss of confidence and self-efficacy. Poor school performance had a self-hindering impact while, with one exception, those with good examination results took self-enhancing steps following improved efficacy beliefs (Bandura 2001). Good examination results could counteract other family constraints, motivating girls like Jhanvi-C to borrow money from a relative when her parents could not afford college admission. Their thickened agency changed the relationship with their parents and impacted upon their environment.

Notably, the expression of personal agency appeared to come at a cost for some girls. Jhanvi-C for example, struggled with a sense of guilt that she had acted in a self-interested way, rather than consider the needs and poverty stress of her family. As with the previous group, some girls in Group 2 experienced shocks like the illness of the breadwinner (Dhriti-SP), which thinned their agency and undermined progress to college. Yet Dhriti-SP showed agency in seeking help from her teacher. Although this was ultimately unsuccessful in changing her environment, she nonetheless felt happier once her teacher helped her accept her situation, again indicating that her agency affected her emotions (Bell 2012). Subsequently, she used her agency on behalf of her younger sister knowing that she was acting in the interest of her family. Dhriti thus demonstrated agency, according to her values within a marginalised context, even if this reproduced patriarchal social relationships (Campbell and Mannell 2016).

The girls in Group 3, who had no disruptions to their schooling, all lived in families with more enabling than constraining influences on girls' agency. These girls received strong parental support for their education and employment opportunities, which acted as important thickeners of their agency. There was little poverty stress, and no catastrophic changes to household functioning through death or illness of a parent. It is worth noting that the girls from *devadasi* backgrounds in this group seemed to have similar aspirations and agency to the others. The one underlying constraint shared by all girls, even in this most privileged group, was the potential threat of reputational loss and respect when girls are seen to interact with boys in public.

Because of the greater alignment of the girls' and the parents' aspirations, there was also less evidence of conflict between Group 3 girls and their parents. These girls had thicker and more 'public' agency (Robson, Bell and Klocker 2007) as evidenced by the fact that participants in *Samata* showed greater ability to express themselves. 'Having the confidence to ask' was a typical refrain from *Samata* participants. It seems surprising then that girls in both this and the previous group showed little personal agency with respect to marriage.

Norm change, awareness of laws and rights, and foremost the prospect of further education and potential employment opportunities before marriage, put the ideal age of marriage at 20 or above. So long as they do well at school it seems that this was a family aspiration, yet beyond timing, girls felt that their parents should select who they marry, not wanting personal control. This may be linked to the enduring threat of reputational consequences for girls and families when girls and boys interact and thus an example of 'proxy agency' (Bandura 2001). Girls turn to their parents to act on their behalf, because their agency is so constrained by patriarchal social norms that they are simply not in a position to do this themselves. Indeed, most girls said that they trusted their families to ask her approval and consent once a potential boy was selected.

To extract lessons from the intervention for future practice, we compare narratives from girls in the intervention versus control communities. *Samata's* influence along the agency continuum from thin to thick, seemed to parallel the experience of girls with most to least constrained family contexts. There was little the intervention could do to absorb shocks of a mother's serious illness or death or to counteract severe poverty stress. Neither did the intervention have the desired impact on gender equitable norms around girls' education and delayed marriage, as these aims were at least partially achieved by governmental structural changes and resources such as scholarship for scheduled caste and scheduled tribe families. Conversely, the intervention appeared to have had the biggest impact on thickening individual's agency among girls living in more supportive families whereby girls benefited most from the life skills training to start questioning prevailing gender practices. This was most evident in the way girls demonstrated their reflection of gender norms and their increased confidence to negotiate with parents. Outreach workers' regular engagement with both girls and parents was clearly crucial to initiate and ensure in-depth discussion about community norms regarding restricted mobility for girls and the impact on girls' education. While *Samata* participants mentioned debating these issues with their parents, girls in the control communities had not reflected on these issues and hence did not perceive them as problematic. The vocalisation of previously unspoken but rigid gender norms around girls' mobility was also proven central to trust building between parents and daughters and to girls achieving more access to public space in urban settlements in Mumbai (Bankar et al. 2018).

This finding is not unsurprising given that engagement with *Samata* is ultimately self-selective. The families with the most entrenched negative gender norms that *Samata* was trying to neutralise, were the families 'least ready for change' and hence were not receptive to intervention outreach. In line with Rogers' diffusion theory, late adopters are particularly susceptible to the social expectations of other laggards and require additional encouragement through interpersonal communication with peers to move towards adopting new norms (Rogers 2003). Girls' narratives suggested that the actions of the community advisory boards at village level had been successful in reversing parental decisions on child marriage and school drop-out of young girls in their community. The involvement of girls on these boards inspired them to become active community voices for girl's empowerment, thereby themselves demonstrating the thickest public agency (Robson, Bell and Klocker 2007). It is hoped that the community advisory boards can outlive the *Samata* project as an important community resource for sustaining norm change.

The main limitation in this study is the lack of data from parents to corroborate girls' assertions of how their relationships and freedoms have changed. Interviews with parents would have helped predict the sustainability of the changes reported by girls.

Conclusion

In summary, girls in supportive family contexts and reached by *Samata* demonstrated thicker agency through reflecting on, discussing and challenging prevailing gender practices. This qualitative analysis highlights the enabling and constraining factors on girls' agency continuum and illustrates the need for additional support to neutralise negative gender norms in families with the most constraints on girls' agency and during periods of particular health and financial crisis. Girls' narratives suggest that tackling gender norms around mobility, access to public spaces and family reputation, along with empowering girls with thicker agency to advocate for girls with thinner agency, could further enhance female empowerment within these contexts.

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