

## **Educational achievements of female students in middle class and working-class families**

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### **Abstract**

*There is a close relationship between social class and educational achievement, regardless of how the education system is organized. Students from affluent backgrounds are significantly more likely to enter higher education than those from poor backgrounds. Moreover, being working class girls seems to be an added disadvantage. Even though Sri Lanka paints a picture where girls outperform boys, it is only clearly visible in the middle class. Thus, the main objective of this study was to find out whether there was a disparity in educational achievements of female students in the middle class and lower class, by identifying educational achievement and comparing family background factors contributing to educational achievements of female students, through assessing the variations in achievement and the background factors contributing for such variations. A mixed design was used for a random sample of 200 female students and their parents of IAB, IC and Type 2 schools from the Galle Educational Zone. These students were from Grade 8 classes as Grade 8 was the completion grade of Junior Secondary Level. Data was collected through questionnaires and interviews. Correlations were used to analyze quantitative data together with thematic analysis for qualitative data.*

*Findings suggested that social class influenced educational achievement, mostly the education and profession of parents as contributing factors for social class than income. The argument of the research had been that even though there seemed to be girls outperforming boys in Sri Lanka, there were disparities in achievement among girls in relation to their social classes. This study projected the point that girls of low social classes should be taken into consideration when making policy decisions as well. Otherwise, the country would be more biased towards middle class children, furthering their opportunities for high success rates. The Kannagara policies that guaranteed better lives for poor children may once again become just a façade in this inequality.*

**Keywords:** *Educational Achievement, Middle Class, Working Class, Female Students*

## **Introduction/Background**

There is a very close relationship between social class and educational achievement, regardless of how the education system is organized. Students from affluent backgrounds are significantly more likely to enter higher education than those from poor backgrounds. Working class students are more likely to pursue vocational subjects which may be because some working-class parents place less emphasis on education as a means to get on in life (Jayaweera, 2012). The undervaluing of education, by adults combined with more limited career aspiration, results in working class children viewing schooling as merely a prelude to getting a manual job. Moreover, children from disadvantage backgrounds are more likely to leave school at 16; some sociologists believe that this is because working class culture is fatalistic, that parents pass on the idea that their lower status is relatively fixed (Jayaweera, 2018). The impact of this could cause working class children disregard in investing time and effort into something which will not have any effect on their lives. Further, working class children are also more likely to start school unable to read as their parents seem to put less emphasis on education.

Therefore, the effect of social class on educational achievement in this era is widespread. Moreover, being working class girls seems to be an added disadvantage. Research suggests that socialized gender roles affect females' access to education. For example, similar to Sri Lanka in Nigeria, children are socialized into their specific gender role as soon as their parents know their gender (Wise & Dolby, 2012). Men are the preferred gender and are encouraged to engage in computer and scientific learning while the women learn domestic skills (Sri Lanka Foundation International, 2017). These gender roles are deep rooted within the state. On the other hand, Sri Lanka even though paints a picture where girls outperform boys (Aturupane & Ebenezer, 2017), it is only clearly visible in the middle class. The gap between gender and achievement is wider in the lower social classes. Therefore, this study sought to find out the background factors that hindered educational achievement of girls.

## **Research Methodology**

Main objective of this study was to discover whether there was a disparity in educational achievements of girl students in the middle class and lower classes. Following were the sub-objectives of the study.

1. To identify educational achievement of middle class and lower-class girl students

2. To compare family background factors contributing to educational achievements of female students of both social classes

The sample for this study was drawn from schools of the Galle Educational Zone. A total sample of 200 female students and 200 parents from three types of schools, 1AB, 1C and Type 2 schools were selected for the study. These students were from Grade 8 classes as this was the year prior to the completion grade of junior secondary level (NEC, 2017/12). The sample of students consisted of both middle class and lower class. Data was collected through questionnaires distributed to students and parents and focus group interviews for selected students and their parents of both social classes. Following Table 1 presents a summary of the sample and data collection techniques.

**Table 1: Sample and Data Collection Technique**

Sample	Total		Data Collection Technique
Schools	3	1AB 1C Type 2	
Students	200	1 AB (70 students) 1 C (70 students) Type 2 (60 students)	Questionnaires and focus-group (randomly selected 10 students from each school) interviews
One parent or the caretaker of the selected students	200		Questionnaires and focus-group (parents of the selected students) interviews

The data was analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods. Correlations were used to determine the contributing factors for educational achievement together with thematic analysis of qualitative data. Following findings provide an understanding about the dilemmas regarding educational achievements in relation to gender of different social classes.

## Discussion

As mentioned above, an objective of this study was to see whether there was a disparity between the achievement levels of female students of middle and low social classes. According to the Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka (2017), there were four categories of socio-economic groups based on the monthly income level; Poorest 20% (Rs.14,843), Poorest 40% (Rs.22,423), Middle 60% (Rs.46,097), Richest 20% (Rs.158,072). Considering these categories, the sample of girls was categorized into four groups. When

considering the income level, the educational achievement of female students showed a positive correlation between the two variables ( $r = .058$ ). However, the relationship was not significant ( $p = 0.566$ ). Therefore, the income might not be a prominent contributor to the educational achievement of the selected sample. Further, the overall achievement levels of the majority of the girls were below 60% irrespective of the social class they belonged to.

On the other hand, the achievement level of girls with the school type showed a significant relationship ( $r = .200$ ,  $p = .040$ ); which was as mentioned earlier, is a common pattern in the country. Of the three schools, the Type 1AB School was a co-ed school which was about 4 km away from the city. This school had a 1300 student enrolment, 108 teachers, and 15 non-academic staff. All prescribed physical facilities were available for students and staff but a playground. The O/L achievement percentage was 83%. The Type 1C School had a 1000 student enrolment, 85 teachers, and nine non-academic staff. This school lacked sufficient physical infrastructure, including furniture for students. The school was about 20 km away from the city. The O/L achievement percentage was 72%. The Type 2 School was about 16 km further from the city with 720 students, 56 teachers, and 6 non-academic staff. This school had sufficient buildings but lacked classroom furniture. The O/L achievement percentage was 62%. A glance at the background of the three schools denoted the common problem in Sri Lanka about the School Type, which was the anomaly in the provision of both physical and human facilities and the difference in educational achievement. Thus, social class influence for student enrolment should be taken into consideration here. When observing the demographics of the family background, it was interesting to see the education (father  $r = .260$   $p = .009$ , mother  $r = .240$   $p = .014$ ) and occupation (father  $r = .148$   $p = .139$ , mother  $r = .428$   $p = .000$ ) of both parents significantly influence school enrolment. It was evident that children of social classes were segregated according to the social class, and that had an impact on educational achievement. Therefore, the girls of low social classes who were in Type 1AB schools had a higher success rate than their counterparts. Thus, indirectly the social class of the student had a significant impact on their educational achievement.

These findings were further strengthened by the data of focus group interviews. The aspirations of both parents and students for further studies, student motivation to learn and the friendly atmosphere in the school seemed to be contributing factors for educational achievement. The culture of the school seemed to be promoting these kinds of attitudes. Interestingly, the Type 2 School seemed to be child friendlier than the other two, and students

were happier there in comparison. However, in this exam-oriented education system, more focus on the mere subject matter seemed to be essential for high educational achievement.

The second objective of this research was to compare family background factors contributing to educational achievements of female students of both social classes. Parents' time spent on playing with the child seemed to be influencing educational achievement ( $r=-.209$   $p=.037$ ) reversibly. For instance, it seemed that the more time spent with parents on physical activities, the less achieving the student became. This showed another grave problem of the exam-oriented education of the country in which much time was expected on amassing knowledge rather than the overall happiness of a child. This was further elaborated when looking at the social class wise disparities. Even though it was not significant, there seemed to be a high probability of parental income progressively reducing the family time they had with their children ( $r=-.058$   $p=.566$ ). As mentioned earlier, the parental occupation had a significant contribution to school enrolment. It was evident in this data too that there was a positive relationship between the level of education and the profession of the parents. Therefore, those who had better qualifications were in better jobs which successively had secured them a better school for the child. This would guarantee a comparatively higher success rate. Focus group interviews strengthened the above findings. Parental social class determined the family time and other recreational activities. The social class seemed to be influencing the decisions regarding time spent on education-related activities.

## **Conclusion**

It was evident from this study that social class influenced educational achievement, mostly the education and profession of parents than the income. The argument of the research had been that even though there seemed to be girls out performing boys in Sri Lanka, there were disparities in achievement among girls in relation to their social classes. Therefore, taking a general stance that girls are good in studies will leave them out when focusing on educational policies for remedial actions for boys. This study projected the point that girls of low social classes should be taken into consideration when making policy decisions. Otherwise, the country would be more biased towards middle class children, furthering their opportunities for high success rates. The Kannagara policies that guaranteed better educational opportunities for poor children may once again become just a façade in this inequality.

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