

UNDERSTANDING THE EDUCATIONAL BACKWARDNESS AND LIFE OUTCOMES OF GIRL CHILDREN OF SUGARCANE WORKERS IN BEED, MAHARASHTRA

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received: 20th February 2026 Accepted: 01st March 2026 Published: 07th March 2026 Keywords: Educational discontinuity; Early marriage; Gender norms; Girl child education; Learning loss; Seasonal migration; Sugarcane workers	Seasonal migration for sugarcane cutting is a routine livelihood strategy for many poor households in Beed district, Maharashtra, shaped by drought, insecure rural employment, and debt. Although migration supports income during the lean season, it disrupts children's schooling and weakens learning continuity. Girls face sharper disadvantage because school breaks intersect with gender norms, unpaid care work, safety concerns, and early marriage pressure. This study examines educational backwardness and early life outcomes of girls from sugarcane-worker families using a mixed-method design. School migration records and household survey information were complemented by interviews with girls, parents, and teachers, two focus group discussions, and field observations across source villages and destination settlements. Thematic analysis shows recurring school discontinuity, learning loss, and difficult re-entry after return. Girls experience a triple burden of schooling expectations, domestic care work, and household support, while sanitation and safety constraints restrict mobility during adolescence. Prolonged gaps increase dropout risk and early marriage pressure, and existing support measures remain uneven because school records and entitlements are not portable across locations.

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INTRODUCTION

Seasonal migration is a long-term livelihood pattern in rural India where agriculture is uncertain and local work is limited. In Beed district of Maharashtra, drought conditions, low farm income, and household debt push families to migrate each year for sugarcane cutting. Recruitment is largely contractor-led and organized through family-based work groups, so whole households often move and live in temporary camps with weak water, sanitation, and safety.

Schooling systems assume stable residence and regular attendance, but migrant children live between two places. When migration occurs mid-year, girls miss weeks or months of teaching and assessment and return with learning gaps that raise repetition and dropout risk. Their disadvantage is intensified by unpaid domestic work and sibling care, tighter mobility control during adolescence, and safety and dignity concerns in camps. These pressures can increase early marriage risk, which becomes a permanent exit from education.

This paper examines how seasonal sugarcane migration shapes educational backwardness and early life outcomes for girls in high-migration villages of Beed. It links school discontinuity to learning loss, household burdens, safety barriers, and policy access gaps, arguing for migration-responsive and gender-sensitive education governance.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Beed district, seasonal sugarcane migration repeatedly interrupts girls' education because schooling systems assume stable residence, continuous attendance, and fixed-location entitlements. Girls face compounded disadvantage through learning loss after migration, heavier unpaid care responsibilities, mobility restrictions linked to safety concerns, and rising early marriage pressure. Interventions such as seasonal hostels and worksite schooling are uneven and rarely provide portable, continuous learning support, reproducing educational backwardness across migration cycles.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To examine how seasonal sugarcane migration disrupts schooling continuity and learning progress of girl children in Beed district.
- To identify key barriers behind educational backwardness among migrant girls at school, household, and socio-cultural levels.
- To analyze how gender norms and unpaid care work during migration increase girls' burden and reduce their access to schooling.
- To assess how repeated disruption shapes early life outcomes for girls, including dropout risk, early marriage pressure, and constrained opportunities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How does seasonal migration affect girls' attendance, continuity, and learning progress in Beed district?

- What school and administrative challenges reduce migrant girls' connection with education across the migration cycle?
- How do household responsibilities, social expectations, and safety-related restrictions shape girls' education during migration?
- What early life impacts follow disrupted schooling, especially regarding dropout pathways, early marriage risk, and aspirations?

Review of Literature

Seasonal and circular migration supports livelihoods but creates service gaps because most systems assume stable residence (Deshingkar & Farrington, 2009). In education, repeated absence disrupts assessment and teacher engagement, and weak re-entry contributes to cumulative learning loss and dropout risk (Panjiar, 2007). Child-focused reports also note weak tracking and limited destination-side continuity support for migrant children.

Sugarcane cutting is seasonal, labor-intensive, and contractor-led, and families often migrate as work units. Temporary settlements, long work hours, and inadequate sanitation reduce study time and wellbeing, indirectly affecting schooling (Bansode, 2014). Recent work highlights that sugarcane migration also generates social vulnerability for children (Lagad & Khurangr, 2025).

Gender norms shape migration's educational effects. Girls often take on unpaid care work and household tasks that intensify during migration, reducing learning time. Safety fears, lack of privacy, and poor sanitation restrict adolescent girls' mobility and increase absenteeism. When learning gaps persist, families may treat schooling as less viable and marriage as a protective option, linking discontinuity to early marriage pathways (Panjiar, 2007; Global March Against Child Labour, 2024). Local accounts underline the social and emotional costs of sugarcane-linked migration (Joshi, 2023; Manohar, 2023).

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act provides a legal basis for universal schooling (Government of India, 2009). However, migrant children face barriers because admissions, records, and entitlements are tied to fixed residence. Maharashtra's seasonal hostels and worksite learning arrangements show uneven reach and variable quality, and portability remains weak. Drought and resource constraints in Beed help explain why migration persists and why education policy must be migration-adaptive (Central Ground Water Board, 2013; Census of India, 2011; Vohra, 2022).

RESEARCH GAP

Research documents migration-related school disruption, but it often under-explains how repeated migration translates into girls' learning loss and exit from education in sugarcane corridors. Field-based analysis linking camp conditions, care work, mobility control, and safety constraints to cumulative learning loss and early life outcomes remains limited. Evidence on whether seasonal hostels and worksite learning sustain adolescent girls' education over time is unclear. Finally, portability and accountability of school records and entitlements for mobile children remain weakly examined at the district level.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study uses a gender lens and a rights-and-capability perspective. The gender lens treats gender as everyday rules that shape who receives time, freedom, and support for education. In sugarcane-worker families, girls' schooling is constrained by increased care work during migration, stricter mobility control during adolescence, and safety and dignity challenges in camps (especially toilets, privacy, and safe routes). Educational backwardness is therefore approached as a gendered outcome of unequal burdens and unequal freedoms.

The rights-and-capability perspective treats education as an entitlement and as a basis for real freedom. The focus is not only enrolment but whether girls have practical conditions to learn and continue. This emphasizes governance design, institutional responsibility, and the portability of services and entitlements.

A pathway model guides analysis: seasonal migration leads to school discontinuity (absence, transfer issues, missed exams), which produces learning loss and age-grade mismatch. These gaps reduce school attachment through irregular attendance and low support, creating exit pathways such as dropout, early marriage pressure, and increased household labour, ultimately shaping early life outcomes including limited skills and restricted opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

Study area: The study was conducted in Beed district in four high-migration villages (Niwadanwadi, Dahifal, Doiphodwadi, Sanapwadi). Field visits covered village schools and Anganwadi centres. Destination-side understanding was developed through visits to two sugar factories where families migrate for work: Sahyadri Sahakari Sakhar Karkhana Ltd. (Karad) and Kranti Cooperative Sugar Factory (Sangli).

Research design: A mixed-method design was used with qualitative emphasis. Quantitative information mapped patterns (attendance disruption; access to support), while qualitative evidence explained how and why girls experience disruption across the migration cycle.

Data sources and sampling: Purposive sampling was used. Participants included 15 sugarcane-worker families (household survey schedule), 20 girls (6–16 years), 10 parents (mainly mothers), 7 teachers, 2 labour contractors (mukadam), 2 NGO/social workers (Shantivan Beed, Gram Urja Foundation, Ambejogai), and 2 focus group discussions (teachers/Anganwadi workers; mothers).

Tools/techniques: Data tools included the household survey schedule, semi-structured interviews, review of school and Anganwadi records where available, and field observation of homes, classrooms, and destination settlements (khopis). Qualitative material was analyzed through thematic analysis: familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, cross-group review, and narrative building.

Ethics and limitations: Verbal consent was obtained, identities were anonymised, and child interviews were conducted in safe settings with the option to stop at any time. Limitations include a small sample, incomplete institutional records in some sites, and limited observation of the full migration season due to time and access constraints.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Calendar Mismatch, Discontinuity, and Learning Loss

A consistent pattern is the mismatch between the migration calendar and the school year. Families often leave while classes are in progress and return after months, converting schooling into repeated interruption. Teachers reported sharp attendance decline once the cutting season begins. Girls who migrate miss daily teaching, classroom interaction, and exam periods; girls who remain behind face weaker supervision and greater domestic work. Discontinuity continues after return through learning loss: many girls struggle to follow lessons because core concepts were missed. Teachers described slow learning recovery and frequent age-grade mismatch. Automatic promotion can push girls into higher grades without foundational learning, while repetition can increase stigma for older girls in lower classes. Over successive cycles, learning gaps accumulate and school attachment weakens.

Gendered Burdens and Safety Constraints

Migration intensifies gendered responsibilities. Girls commonly carry a triple burden: keeping up with school expectations, performing unpaid care work (sibling care, cooking support, water collection), and supporting household routines that enable parents' work. This reduces study time, increases fatigue, and can be misread as low interest. As girls enter adolescence, mobility restrictions increase due to safety fears and social judgement. Poor sanitation and limited privacy in camps, unsafe routes, and lack of toilets add dignity barriers, raising absenteeism—especially during menstruation. These findings show that access depends on safety and dignity conditions, not only on the presence of a school.

Exit Pathways and Portability Gaps

When discontinuity and learning gaps persist, families may question the returns to continued schooling. At the same time, marriage pressure often rises in adolescence, and a girl out of school is treated as ready for marriage. Marriage is presented as protection but commonly ends schooling permanently and narrows future opportunities. Support measures remain uneven because school processes and entitlements do not travel smoothly with migrant children. Seasonal hostels face concerns about safety, supervision, and quality, reducing uptake for adolescent girls. Worksite learning reaches limited children and is weakly linked to curriculum and progression. Admission procedures, records, and benefits remain tied to fixed residence, producing repeated exclusion and difficult re-entry.

Table 1. Key Themes and Evidence Summary

Theme	Indicative Codes	Evidence Summary (Study Data)
Calendar mismatch and discontinuity	absence; missed exams; interrupted assessment	Attendance drops during cutting season; girls miss classes and exams, creating repeated interruption.
Learning loss and grade mismatch	weak re-entry; cannot catch up; repetition	Returnees struggle to follow lessons; age-grade mismatch leads to promotion without learning or repetition with stigma.
Triple burden	care work; household support; fatigue	Girls balance schooling expectations with unpaid care and household tasks, reducing study time and energy.
Safety and dignity barriers	sanitation; privacy; fear; restricted mobility	Poor toilets/privacy and safety fears restrict adolescent girls' attendance, especially during menstruation.
Exit pathways	dropout; marriage pressure; insecurity	Prolonged gaps reduce school attachment and increase early marriage pressure as an exit from schooling.
Portability gaps	hostel trust; uneven coverage; weak records	Hostels/worksite learning vary in reach and quality; records and entitlements do not move smoothly across locations.

DISCUSSION

The results show that disruption follows the migration cycle rather than isolated household decisions. The mismatch between migration and the school calendar produces repeated absence and missed assessments, supporting the argument that circular migration generates service gaps where systems assume stable residence (Deshingkar & Farrington, 2009). The study also aligns with research emphasizing cumulative learning loss and weak re-entry as key mechanisms behind dropout risk (Panjiar, 2007).

The analysis clarifies gendered disadvantage: unpaid care work increases during migration, while safety and dignity constraints restrict adolescent girls' mobility. These mechanisms interact with learning loss, making girls more likely to disengage from school and enter exit pathways, including early marriage pressure. This reinforces concerns that child marriage and child labour risks in sugarcane-linked settings are shaped by poverty, insecurity, and weak protection systems (Global March Against Child Labour, 2024).

From a governance perspective, legal guarantees alone do not secure continuity for mobile children. Admissions, records, and entitlements remain tied to place, while hostels and worksite learning show uneven reach and quality (Government of India, 2009). A migration-adaptive approach therefore requires portable records, coordinated inter-district support, and schooling environments that address safety and dignity for adolescent girls.

CONCLUSION

Seasonal sugarcane migration in Beed district repeatedly disrupts girls' schooling and shapes early life vulnerabilities. Discontinuity produces learning loss and age-grade mismatch, while gendered care work and household support reduce time for study. Safety and dignity barriers restrict adolescent girls' mobility and raise absenteeism, and prolonged gaps increase dropout and early marriage pressure.

The study shows that educational backwardness is structurally produced through migration-linked living conditions, weak portability of schooling support, and gender norms. Protecting migrant girls' educational rights requires catch-up learning, portable records and entitlements, safe support systems, and coordinated governance across source and destination locations.

POLICY SUGGESTIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS

- Implement 4–6 week bridge-learning modules after migration with targeted support in reading, writing, and basic mathematics.
- Provide flexible assessment arrangements for children who miss tests due to migration, including re-entry evaluation support.
- Create portable student records and learning profiles to enable temporary enrolment and continuity across districts.
- Strengthen seasonal hostels through timely start, safe infrastructure, supervision, and learning support, with safeguards for adolescent girls.
- Expand worksite learning centres and link them formally to curriculum and grade progression to reduce learning discontinuity.
- Ensure portability of key entitlements (meals, scholarships, learning materials) and clarify responsibility for delivery across locations.
- Strengthen child-protection coordination to prevent early marriage through schools, Anganwadis, local governance bodies, and women's groups.

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