



Contesting Language Politics: Unveiling Layers of Educational Exclusion among Madhesi Dalit Women in Nepal

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Abstract. Madhesi Dalit women constitute one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged and structurally marginalized groups in Nepal. Situated at the intersection of caste, gender, regional location, and linguistic identity, their access to education remains profoundly constrained. This qualitative study examines the complex barriers and enabling factors shaping the educational experiences of Madhesi Dalit women in the districts of Siraha, Mohattari, Bara, Parsa, and Rautahat in Madhes Province. Drawing on life history interviews with Madhesi Dalit women enrolled in higher education, conducted via snowball sampling, the study is theoretically informed by Bourdieu's concepts of linguistic capital and symbolic power. The findings highlight that language politics is central to reproducing educational exclusion. The dominance of Nepali in curricula and classroom instruction alienates students whose mother tongues are Maithili, Bhojpuri, or Awadhi, reinforcing hill-centric cultural norms within the education system. Participants reported significant academic and emotional struggles arising from the linguistic disjuncture between home and school, creating a dual burden of language acquisition and cultural adaptation. Nepali-dominant instruction functions not merely as a pedagogical practice but as a mechanism of symbolic exclusion that silences participation and undermines confidence. Linguistic marginalization is compounded by caste-based discrimination, gendered norms, early marriage, domestic labor, and economic insecurity, collectively limiting access to higher education. At the same time, the narratives reveal resilience and agency: women mobilized support through peers, teachers, family encouragement, and Dalit organizations, and some strategically accumulated dominant linguistic capital by mastering Nepali, transforming exclusion into empowerment. These findings underscore the urgent need for inclusive multilingual education policies, stronger institutional mechanisms, and structural reforms to challenge entrenched caste-gender-language hierarchies in Nepal's education system.

Keywords: Nepal, Madhesi Dalit women, language politics, educational exclusion, multilingual education

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Противостояние политике языка: раскрытие слоёв образовательной дискриминации среди женщин из касты далитов-мадхеси в Непале

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Аннотация. Женщины из касты далитов-мадхеси (неприкасаемых из южных равнин) составляют одну из наиболее социально-экономически обездоленных и структурно маргинализированных групп в Непале. Находясь на пересечении кастовой принадлежности, пола, регионального положения и языковой идентичности, они остаются крайне ограниченными в отношении доступа к образованию. Данное качественное исследование изучает сложные барьеры и факторы, влияющие на получение образования женщинами из касты далитов-мадхеси в округах Сираха, Мохаттари, Бара, Парса и Раутахат провинции Мадхеш. Основываясь на проведённых методом «снежного кома» интервью с женщинами из касты далитов-мадхеси, обучающимися в высших учебных заведениях, исследование теоретически опирается на концепции языкового капитала и символической власти Бурдьё. Результаты показывают, что политика языка играет центральную роль в воспроизведении моделей образовательной дискриминации. Доминирование непальского языка в учебных программах и преподавании отталкивает студентов, чьими родными языками являются майтхили, бходжпури или авадхи, укрепляя в системе образования культурные нормы, ориентированные на горные районы. Участники исследования сообщили о значительных академических и эмоциональных трудностях, возникающих из-за языкового разрыва между домом и школой, что создаёт двойное бремя: необходимость освоения языка и культурной адаптации. Преобладание непальского языка в обучении функционирует не просто как педагогическая практика, но и как механизм символической изоляции, который подавляет возможности активного участия и подрывает уверенность. Языковая маргинализация усугубляется дискриминацией по кастовому признаку, гендерными нормами, ранними браками, домашним трудом и экономической нестабильностью, что в совокупности ограничивает доступ к высшему образованию. В то же время, собранные рассказы демонстрируют стойкость и самостоятельность: женщины смогли получить поддержку через сверстников, учителей, семьи и организации далитов, а некоторые стратегически накопили капитал доминирующего языка, овладев непальским языком и таким образом превратив дискриминацию в расширение своих прав и возможностей. Эти выводы подчёркивают острую необходимость в инклюзивной многоязычной образовательной политике, более сильных институциональных механизмах и структурных реформах для противодействия укоренившимся кастово-гендерно-языковым иерархиям в системе образования Непала.

Ключевые слова: Непал, женщины из касты далитов-мадхеси, политика языка, образовательная дискриминация, многоязычное образование

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1. Context

In Nepal's stratified social and linguistic landscape, Madhesi Dalit women's access to education is constrained by overlapping regimes of caste hierarchy, patriarchal control, cultural subjugation, and language politics. Women in general are subjected to dual forms of discrimination: class-based and gender-based oppression. Dalit women, however, face compounded, triple-layered marginalization rooted in class, caste, and gender. The situation is further exacerbated for Madhesi Dalit women, who endure two additional layers of exclusion – subjugation under the cultural dominance of *Pahade* (means “people living in hilly areas”) communities and linguistic discrimination. These overlapping oppressions create not only multidimensional challenges but also internal contradictions. Consequently, Madhesi Dalit women experience extreme poverty, systemic caste-based exclusion, and entrenched gender inequality, compounded by linguistic and cultural marginalization. This deeply disadvantaged position directly affects their access to education; in many cases, women remain unaware of the importance of schooling for their children. Among the numerous barriers faced by Madhesi Dalit women, this study identifies linguistic exclusion as one of the most significant obstacles to higher education.

Extensive research underscores the pedagogical value of mother-tongue education. Cummins [5], Skutnabb-Kangas [27], and Heugh and Skutnabb-Kangas [10] argue that mother-tongue-based education is not merely a tool for cultural preservation but also the most effective approach for developing foundational literacy and cognitive skills. These skills, in turn, support learning in additional languages and academic subjects, ultimately improving learning outcomes. Recent evidence from UNESCO [12] and Moraru et al. [15] further demonstrates that high-quality mother tongue instruction in early grades enhances literacy and numeracy, supports second-language acquisition, and improves inclusion and retention. However, these gains depend on careful implementation, including sustained use of the first language, teacher training, appropriate learning materials, community participation, and aligned assessment systems.

Mother-tongue education has been recognized as a critical strategy to enhance educational participation. Dhakal [6, p. 82] notes that providing education in children's mother tongue helps attract children to school. According to the National Census [16], only 44.86 percent of Nepal's population speak Nepali as their mother tongue, while the remaining 55.14 percent belong to communities that speak other languages. This demographic reality underscores the increasing importance of mother tongue-based education. The National Education Commission Report of 1992 was the first policy document to recommend instruction in local mother tongues. Subsequently, the Primary Education Curriculum of 2005 provided a theoretical foundation for mother-tongue instruction. Provisions for developing curricula in local languages have since been incorporated into the National Curriculum Framework (2006), the Constitution of Nepal (2015), the Local Government Operation Act (2017), the Basic Level Curriculum (2019), and the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (2019). Currently, the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) [13] has published sample curricula in 26 languages.

According to the 2021 Census [16], Nepal is home to 142 ethnic groups speaking 124 distinct mother tongues. The CDC has developed curricula centrally in languages such as Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Limbu, Bantawa Rai, Chamling Rai, Sherpa, Gurung, Tamang, Magar, Nepal Bhasa, Tharu, Sunuwar, Rajbanshi, Yakkha, Mugali, Dhimal, Bajjika, Kulung, Chepang, Khaling Rai, Majhi, and Rana Tharu, among others [13]. Reference materials have been prepared in Maithili, Awadhi, Rana Tharu, and Kono, while children's learning materials have been produced in 15 languages, including Maithili, Bhojpuri, Limbu, Tharu, Awadhi, Magar, Nepal Bhasa, Doteli, Thakali, Chamling, Gurung, Sherpa, Bantawa Rai, Urdu, and Sanskrit [13]. More recently, municipalities and rural municipalities have begun developing curricula in their own local languages, responding to the needs of mother-tongue-speaking communities.

Despite these advances, structural barriers remain. As the Census shows, only 44.86 percent of Nepal's population speak Nepali, while 55.14 percent use other languages [16]. Thus, most Nepalis are inherently multilingual. Yet, as Spolsky [28] observes, elites in society have been reluctant to accept mother-tongue instruction. He argues that centralized language planning has rarely succeeded, whereas locally driven initiatives are more effective.

Teachers play a decisive role in curriculum implementation. Pokharel [22] emphasizes that teachers can embody the spirit of the curriculum, making them central to effective mother tongue education. However, a major obstacle at the basic education level is the shortage of qualified language teachers. Although mother-tongue education is formally included in basic schools, adequately trained teachers are rarely available. The government has not created sufficient provisions for teacher recruitment in local languages, and schools often struggle to appoint qualified personnel. This shortage of competent language teachers continues to undermine effective implementation.

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) affirms the country's multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multicultural identity in its preamble. Article 6 recognizes all mother tongues spoken in Nepal as national languages, while Article 7 designates Nepali in the Devanagari script as the official language of state business. Provinces may adopt one or more national languages as official languages based on local majority usage, as determined by provincial law. Article 31, under the fundamental right to education, guarantees every Nepali community the right to receive education in its mother tongue and to establish schools and educational institutions for that purpose. Article 32 further enshrines the right of every community to use, preserve, and promote its own language, script, culture, and heritage. And, Article 287 provisions the Language Commission to determine the basis for language to acquire status of official language, measure the standards for development of mother languages and put forward the recommendation to government.

Building on these constitutional provisions, the Language Commission was formed in 2016 to advise the government on language policy. As Turin and Awasthi [29] note, under the leadership of Lava Deo Awasthi, the Commission developed institutional and legal frameworks, recommended provincial official languages, and initiated programs for language revitalization in collaboration with international organizations such as UNESCO. Despite these achievements, challenges persist – particularly societal preference for English-medium education and the lack of localized evidence to persuade policymakers of the benefits of early-grade mother tongue instruction.

Nepal's Education Act of 1971 (Clause 7, Medium of Instruction) stipulates that schools may adopt Nepali, English, or a combination of both as mediums of instruction. The Act further allows primary education to be delivered in the mother tongue, permits non-Nepali citizens to study an alternative language subject in place of Nepali, requires language subjects to be taught in their respective languages, and mandates that English be taught as a compulsory subject in English. Complementing this, various policies have been introduced to promote mother-tongue education in Nepal. In multilingual classrooms, mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) is encouraged, while subjects related to Nepali arts, culture, and social studies are required to be taught in Nepali, as outlined in the National Education Policy (2019). A significant milestone in this regard was the 1992 National Education Commission Report, which first recommended the use of local mother tongues as a medium of instruction. Subsequent policy frameworks (2005–2019) gradually integrated mother-tongue education into curricula and legal provisions establishing it as a foundation of educational policy. At present, the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) has developed and published sample curricula in 26 languages. Similarly, the Language Commission (2016), in collaboration with UNESCO, has advanced policies and revitalization initiatives [12]. However, these efforts face considerable challenges due to the widespread preference for English and the limited availability of local evidence supporting mother-tongue education. Despite the existence of such policy provisions, a persistent gap in implementation has adversely affected students from linguistic minority communities, particularly those belonging to Madhesi backgrounds and female students.

2. Language Politics: Constructing Nationality in Madhes

The politics of language in Nepal emerged as a crucial aspect of nationalism in the early 1950s. As national leaders promoted Nepali as the lingua franca and the medium of instruction in schools, resistance arose from other language communities, particularly in the Tarai². The first National Educational

¹ The naming of Nepal's southern plains as "Terai" or "Tarai" is not merely an orthographic variation but reflects broader language politics and hegemonic processes of linguistic standardization. "Terai" is the state-sanctioned form commonly used in official documents, school curricula, and

Planning Commission (1954) recommended Nepali as the sole medium of instruction from the third grade onward, discouraging the use of other languages in primary schools. This policy reflected the state's priority of forging national unity but simultaneously marginalized linguistic diversity. By the mid-1950s, language disputes had become one of the most contested political issues, reflecting similar struggles in other newly independent or developing nations [7].

In the Tarai, the emergence of the Nepal Tarai Congress under Vedananda Jha in 1951 marked the beginning of organized opposition to state language policies. The party demanded recognition of Hindi as a state language, autonomy for the Tarai, and proportional representation of Tarai people in the civil service. Hindi advocacy soon became a rallying point, and when the government sought to enforce Nepali as the sole instructional medium, pro-Hindi protests erupted in towns such as Biratnagar in 1956. The state responded with restrictions, including citizenship requirements for teachers and mandatory Nepali proficiency. Although some concessions, such as relaxation of the citizenship rule, were introduced in 1958, the government maintained its emphasis on Nepali, further deepening the divide between the hills and the plains.

Census data further complicated the debate. The 1952/54 censuses revealed that Tarai languages like Maithili, Bhojpuri, and Rajbanshi were dominant in the Tarai, while only a small fraction identified Hindi as their mother tongue. Nevertheless, Hindi was widely spoken as a second language, facilitating communication across regional groups; by 1961, over 60 percent of the Tarai population reportedly spoke Hindi as either a first or second language. In contrast, only about a quarter of the population used Nepali in a similar capacity. These figures reinforced plains leaders' demands for Hindi recognition, while Kathmandu elites perceived Hindi not as a neutral lingua franca but as a political symbol of Tarai resistance against hill dominance.

Political parties responded differently to these tensions. The Nepali Congress recognized Nepali as the national language but was open to promoting local languages. The Communist Party, in contrast, emphasized regional linguistic rights and supported Hindi as a medium of instruction in the Tarai. However, King Mahendra's 1959 Constitution reaffirmed Nepali in the Devanagari script as the sole national language, consolidating state policy around linguistic unification. While these directives mainly affected urban schools and elite families rather than rural villagers, the establishment of the 1961 National Education Commission and the Education Act of 1972 institutionalized Nepali as the official medium of instruction. This decision entrenched the state's commitment to centralization and set the stage for decades of contestation over language, identity, and national unity in Nepal.

According to Pratyush Onta [18], during the Panchayat regime, the state aimed to cultivate an image of a courageous, masculine nation by suppressing diverse historical narratives and promoting a singular national identity. In this process, textbooks functioned as a strategic instrument to shape collective memory and reinforce the ideals of Nepali nationalism. Scholars identify the Nepali language, Hindu religion, the monarchy, and the tradition of writing heroic national history as the four main pillars of Nepali identity and nationalism [26], [3], [11], [19].

During the Panchayat era (1960–1990), King Mahendra strategically used education to cultivate loyal, ideologically aligned citizens. Schools, previously managed locally, were brought under centralized state control, curtailing community autonomy and political plurality. Education became a tool to foster loyalty to the monarchy and construct a homogenized national identity. Textbooks, particularly in history and social studies, glorified selected heroes and an idealized national past, erasing historical complexities and dissent. The Panchayat slogan *Ek Raja, Ek Bhasa, Ek Besh* ("One King, One Language, One Attire") reinforced uniformity in language, dress, and values, embedding devotion to the Crown. This project of ideological conformity outlived the regime, continuing to shape curricula and national narratives

Kathmandu-centered institutional discourse. In contrast, "Tarai" is more closely associated with Madhesi everyday usage and the Hindi-Urdu cultural-linguistic geography, and is often preferred within Madhes-centered political narratives. Accordingly, this study adopts the term "Tarai".

in post-1990 Nepal [20]. The politics of privileging Nepali as the sole medium of instruction remained a dominant factor in perpetuating discrimination and denying linguistic rights to diverse mother-tongue-speaking ethnic and indigenous communities.

Due to entrenched structural barriers, particularly those rooted in regional and linguistic hierarchies, the people of the Tarai–Madhes have long encountered obstacles in accessing education and other opportunities. Although in recent years certain legal and institutional mechanisms have been introduced to recognize and address the linguistic diversity of Nepal’s communities, these initiatives remain under-documented and insufficiently debated in academic and policy discourses. More importantly, the lived realities of the most marginalized groups within these communities – such as Madhesi Dalit women – have received little to no systematic attention. Their experiences of resisting multiple and intersecting barriers, alongside the enabling factors shaping their educational trajectories, remain largely unexplored. This study addresses this critical gap by foregrounding their voices and analyzing the socio-structural dynamics that shape their pursuit of education through Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of linguistic capital and symbolic power.

Bourdieu argues that in multilingual societies, one language becomes institutionally legitimized as the “legitimate language”, carrying greater value in schooling, government, prestige, and social mobility [1, p. 45–49]. In Nepal, Nepali functions as this dominant linguistic capital, while Madhesi mother tongues such as Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, and Tharu are often positioned as non-standard or inferior, producing exclusion from meaningful participation and unequal outcomes. This dominance reflects symbolic power, through which institutions impose linguistic hierarchies that reproduce social inequality, generating symbolic violence where marginalized speakers internalize silence and inadequacy [2]. For Madhesi Dalit women, such linguistic marginalization intersects with caste oppression, gendered constraints, and regional exclusion. At the same time, this framework highlights enabling possibilities, as linguistic capital can be expanded through recognition of minority languages, multilingual pedagogies, and inclusive educational environments that challenge dominant norms [1].

3. Methodology

This research is guided by a critical paradigm, which is particularly relevant for examining the Dalit issue due to its connections with oppression, historical injustice, and marginalization. Critical inquiry also challenges injustice and supports emancipatory change [30]. The study was conducted in the districts of Siraha, Mohattari, Bara, Parsa, and Rautahat in Madhes Province, which serve as centers of language politics and have a significant concentration of Madhesi Dalit communities. Given the difficulty of identifying Madhesi Dalit women who have accessed higher education, snowball sampling was employed to recruit participants. A qualitative research approach was adopted to provide rich, detailed insights into the experiences and perspectives of individuals [4]. This approach enabled the researcher to understand participants’ lived realities from their own standpoint. In addition to fieldwork, relevant legal documents and government policies concerning language diversity and mother-tongue education in Nepal were reviewed to provide contextual grounding.

As Creswell [4] notes, qualitative interviews are useful when the goal is to gain deep insight into complex human issues, as they provide opportunities for participants to express their perspectives in their own words. Therefore, the in-depth interview method is rational in studies that seek nuanced understanding rather than numerical measurement. Based on this rationale, altogether, ten in-depth interviews were conducted with Madhesi Dalit women pursuing higher education. This study also sought to ensure representation across different castes and genders within Madhes Province as far as possible.

Data collected from both fieldwork and document review were analyzed in alignment with the study’s research questions. The analysis followed a modified combination of the generic steps outlined by Creswell [4] and Marshall and Rossman [14], which involved categorizing events, daily activities, individuals, and other relevant information in accordance with the research objectives, and interpreting them coherently within the framework of the study. As Riessman [25] argues, narrative analysis is particularly useful in qualitative research for understanding how participants represent their identities, struggles,

and aspirations through their own accounts. In this study, the narratives of Madhesi Dalit women were analyzed to capture the ways they describe educational journeys, experiences of marginalization, and strategies of resilience, thereby generating deeper insight into their situated realities. Finally, the primary data were triangulated with insights from the reviewed literature and theory to ensure comprehensive interpretation and validation of findings. Ethical considerations were carefully maintained during the interview process. This included obtaining informed consent from respondents, ensuring the confidentiality of the information they shared, and protecting their identities by using pseudonyms in all published articles and reports.

4. Intersecting Inequalities: The Multilayered Struggle in Higher Education

For Madhesi Dalit women, the pursuit of higher education transcends the realm of academic endeavor; it represents an ongoing struggle against deeply entrenched systems of exclusion grounded in language, caste, gender, and socioeconomic status. Their lived experiences reflect a multifaceted matrix of intersecting oppressions, wherein each dimension reinforces and compounds the others. These barriers are not isolated incidents but are embedded within structural inequalities that systematically limit access to educational opportunities. Drawing upon life history narratives of Madhesi Dalit women, this section offers an analysis of their experiences, highlighting how personal trajectories of education are shaped by broader sociocultural, political, and economic forces.

The most consistent and pervasive barrier is the hegemony of the Nepali language in education, which devalues native tongues such as Bhojpuri, Maithili, and Bajjika. In colleges and universities, where instruction is conducted exclusively in Nepali, students transition from struggling to express themselves to experiencing a more profound silencing of intellectual participation. As one respondent explained, “In college, since all instruction was in Nepali and many of my friends were Nepali-speaking, I found it very difficult to communicate... I struggled to ask questions”. She shares her story of discrimination as follows: “I still recall an incident when the classroom was noisy, and I asked why everyone was making so much noise (*Kina chillāiraheko?*). My classmates mocked me by twisting my words into a joke (*Kina chilāyako?*). That incident troubled me for several days” (Sindhu Mahara², personal interview). This silence is not a matter of choice, but a condition imposed by the system, restricting their ability to engage critically with course material, participate in discussions, and seek clarification. On one occasion, a social studies teacher assigned homework, but due to the language barrier, Sindhu was unable to understand the task. When she went to school without completing the assignment, she was subjected to physical punishment, an experience that left her deeply distressed.

Reema Baitha shares her story of language discrimination as follows:

“Once, my mother came to visit me at school and affectionately called me “Rimuwa,” a Bhojpuri diminutive of Reema. The teachers and students, however, ridiculed her, saying that she should not even utter her child’s name and questioning what kind of mother she was. Feeling humiliated, my mother never returned to school again. Only after she became fluent in Nepali she regained the confidence to visit the school, this time to see her grandchildren” (Reema Baitha, personal interview).

As noted earlier, Madhesi students have to bear the “burden of language problems” while simultaneously navigating a curriculum “shaped by hill culture that did not resonate with their local soil” (Sindhu Mahara, personal interview). They are thus compelled to learn new concepts through a linguistic and cultural lens that is foreign to them, placing them at an immediate disadvantage compared to native Nepali-speaking peers from the hills. The language barrier frequently results in poor academic performance, which is often misinterpreted as a lack of intelligence. Kunti Rabidas recalls believing her weak results meant she was “unintelligent” (Kunti Rabidas, personal interview on 24 August 2025). Due to the language issue, she was badly punished by her teacher. She mentions:

² Pseudonyms have been assigned to all respondents to ensure confidentiality and protect their identities throughout the study.

“Learning in the Nepali language was always very difficult for me. At times, teachers also used Maithili during instruction, which gave me the impression that I understood. However, when it came to writing or answering questions, I realized that I had not fully grasped the lessons. Completing homework was also a major challenge due to the language barrier, and as a result, my examination results were often very weak. This made me feel sad as though I was unintelligent.

Once, during a Social Studies class, a Brahmin teacher asked me what I had learned from the lesson. Since I had not fully understood his teaching, I could not answer. One of my classmates also had not understood, so the teacher ordered us to slap each other on the cheeks. I could only slap my friend very lightly, but in return, the teacher struck me so hard on my ear that the pain lasted for many days. My ear nerve hurt so badly that I could not hear properly, and I was unable to attend school for about fifteen to sixteen days” (Kunti Rabidas, personal interview on 24 August 2025).

Similarly, Binita Majhi describes the exhausting coping mechanism this produced: “I could never produce original answers in examinations. Whether in homework or in exams, I was forced to memorize and reproduce material word for word” (Binita Majhi, personal interview). She further mentions:

“When I was in Grade 5, a teacher asked me to read aloud, but since I could not, I was forced to start from the very beginning – reciting the Nepali alphabet again and again. Struggling with pronunciation and constant repetition, I somehow managed to reach Grade 8, but I never properly learned grammar, essay writing, or other aspects of the language. For these weaknesses, I was frequently beaten. Once, I mistakenly addressed a teacher with the informal *timi* instead of the respectful *tapai*, believing they meant the same, and was severely scolded and beaten. Our Nepali teacher, Madam Sarita Paudel, was especially strict, appointing a hill-origin student, Upreti, as class monitor to ensure we spoke only Nepali. Because I could not manage, I was often fined ten rupees. These experiences pushed me to encourage my siblings and even my parents to learn Nepali so they would not face the same difficulties (Binita Majhi, personal interview on 28 August 2025).

Teachers regularly punished me for failing to complete homework or for writing incorrect answers. Sometimes, I was forced into the “*murga*” position with three or four bricks placed on my back for up to 45 minutes. Such punishments occurred frequently, solely because of my lack of proficiency in Nepali. Out of fear, I often copied answers directly from textbooks into my homework, even if they were wrong, as I had no other way to avoid punishment” (Binita Majhi, personal interview on 28 August 2025).

To pursue secondary education, she had to walk an hour each way to another school. Upon admission, she was asked to introduce herself in Nepali, but when she struggled, the teachers initially refused her enrollment, declaring, “We cannot admit you if you cannot speak Nepali”. Only after she returned with her father was she finally admitted. Yet, language continued to be a persistent barrier. In Grade 10, she failed in both Nepali and Social Studies, and although she reappeared for the examinations the following year, she barely passed with low marks. The root of this struggle lay in the language barrier, despite her reasonably good performance in other subjects (Binita Majhi, personal interview on 28 August 2025).

Caste-based discrimination was often coupled with linguistic humiliation in the experiences of Madheshi Dalit women. Their Dalit identity compounded linguistic prejudice, giving rise to both overt and covert forms of exclusion, even at advanced levels of education. This pattern reflects the systemic “othering” deeply embedded in academic spaces. Sindhu recalls being mocked by peers for asking questions in Hindi – an incident that demonstrates how caste bias is intertwined with linguistic mockery (Sindhu Mahara, personal interview). Similarly, Binita recounts being hired as a teacher but later forced out when Tharu colleagues refused to drink water she had offered, a stark continuation of “untouchability” practices within a professional academic environment (Binita Majhi, personal interview). Sindhu further shares:

“During my school years, one of the teachers frequently addressed me by saying, “Mahara ji, kya haal-chaal hai?” At that time, I did not understand why he spoke to me in that way, but now I realize it was because I belonged to the Chamar community, and he was belittling me. He would say things like, “You

sit here; no, you should go and sit over there”, deliberately positioning me in the front of the classroom. That teacher’s name was Dinesh Mishra, a Brahmin pandit” (Sindhu Mahara, personal interview on 22 August 2025).

Later, when Sindhu herself became a teacher, she encountered similar challenges. She taught for four years in a school where both teachers and students primarily communicated in Bhojpuri, even though instruction was formally required in Nepali. Her husband helped her improve her Nepali, but she often resorted to explaining lessons in Bhojpuri so that her students could understand. Assigning homework in Nepali was especially difficult. Despite these challenges, she was motivated to continue teaching in order to support adolescent girls, most from her own Chamar community, who had dropped out of school. Even during the lockdown, she invited girls to her home for tuition, persuading reluctant parents to allow their daughters to study again. At the same time, she also worked with an NGO as a social mobilizer (Sindhu Mahara, personal interview on 22 August 2025).

Despite her dedication, Sindhu experienced persistent discrimination against her colleagues. She greeted other teachers respectfully with “Namaste”, but none returned her greeting. This repeated exclusion eventually compelled her to leave the job, despite the fact that she had been teaching Dalit and Muslim children without pay and had been encouraged by some to take up permanent employment (Sindhu Mahara, personal interview).

Binita also shares a similar story. After completing Grade 12, she was invited by her former school principal to teach. Although her academic background was in Health, she was assigned to teach Nepali and English – subjects that were particularly challenging due to her own language barriers. Tharu colleagues prohibited her from using Bhojpuri and deliberately gave her the most difficult classes, while assigning easier ones to their own daughters. She faced daily humiliation and was eventually shifted to teach nursery classes. Although the principal had originally hired her to inspire Musahar and Dalit children, the pressure from Tharu teachers led to her removal. Paid only 6,000 rupees, she eventually resigned in tears. After her departure, many Musahar children dropped out of school altogether (Binita Majhi, personal interview). As Giri [8] and Phyak [21] argue, Nepalese schools often reproduce inequality through invisible language ideologies and socio-cultural hierarchies, marginalizing the most disadvantaged groups. The resulting dropout of Musahar children underscores the profound impact of such systemic exclusion on educational access and retention.

Stereotyping and low expectations also marked the experiences of Madheshi Dalit women. Teachers who declared, “This Chamar girl will never understand, no matter how much she studies”, reinforced a casteist hierarchy of intelligence (Kunti Rabidas, personal interview). Such attitudes extended into higher education, where professors’ guidance and support were often shaped by discriminatory assumptions. Kunti adds her own account of discrimination:

“Our community has long endured oppression. Because of this history, even when we face hardships, we strive to ensure a better future for our children. That is why I enrolled my sons in a boarding school – to give them opportunities I never had. One day, while visiting my younger son in Grade 4, I watched from the window as the teacher asked him to write a sentence on the blackboard. My son hesitated over the last word, and the teacher mocked him, saying, “Children from the Chamar community are always dull, because your parents are uneducated”. Those words burned inside me. I stepped into the classroom and told the teacher, “Sir, I am pursuing my Bachelor’s degree, and my husband has already passed the SLC. At home, we guide our children with care. How dare you demean them?” I encouraged my son to try again, and he wrote the sentence correctly. I then told the teacher, “Education must be given with patience and respect. Through love, even a weak student can learn. But through fear and humiliation, even a bright child can be broken” (Kunti Rabidas, personal interview).

In addition to caste and linguistic discrimination, Madheshi Dalit women face gendered and socio-economic constraints that further obstruct their educational journeys. As women from impoverished, often first-generation learner backgrounds, they encounter multiple hurdles. Early marriage and domestic responsibilities interrupt and delay education. Kunti’s schooling was cut short at sixteen due to marriage,

followed by years of household labor and childbearing. Returning to campus as an adult woman became an act of defiance, exposing her to ridicule. As Sindhu recalls: “People in the village mocked me, saying that at an age when I should be caring for children, I was wearing a uniform and going to school” (Sindhu Mahara, personal interview). Economic hardship further constrains educational continuity. Binita, for example, was forced to suspend her studies for two years after Grade 12, working as a daily wage laborer and farmer to finance her Bachelor’s degree. In such precarious circumstances, setbacks such as failing a single exam can have devastating long-term effects. Moral policing adds another layer of exclusion. As Kunti observes, when Dalit women pursue education, “society often accuses them of having inappropriate relationships with men” (Kunti Rabidas, personal interview). Such suspicions generate additional social risks and emotional strain, making the pursuit of education even more fraught.

The education system itself reinforces exclusion by refusing to adapt to the linguistic and cultural needs of Madhesi Dalit women. There is no institutional support for mother-tongue-based learning. As Sindhu notes: “Local schools and the campuses I have attended do not offer instruction in the local mother tongue, Bhojpuri” (Sindhu Mahara, personal interview). The prioritization of Nepali – and increasingly English – further alienates them. Faculty bias constitutes another barrier. While some teachers were supportive as Sharamila, Chandrika, and Binita acknowledge, many perpetuated trauma. The corporal punishments of primary schooling may recede in higher education, but they are replaced by subtler forms of neglect, ridicule, and lowered expectations from educators lacking inclusive pedagogy. The educational experiences of Madhesi Dalit women illustrate how linguistic hierarchies reproduce structural exclusion. Bourdieu [2] explains that dominant languages like Nepali function as legitimate linguistic capital, while Bhojpuri and other mother tongues are devalued, and such denial, combined with faculty biases and subtle neglect, constitutes symbolic violence.

5. Breaking Barriers: The Overcoming Strategies of Madhesi Dalit Women

Despite the formidable challenges they encounter, Madhesi Dalit women demonstrate an unyielding spirit, drawing on personal determination and collective strategies to sustain their educational pursuits. In the absence of robust institutional support, they have actively nurtured alternative networks of care and assistance, with family and community playing pivotal roles. Spousal encouragement, in particular, often proved decisive: Kunti’s husband, though lacking formal education himself, managed her admission paperwork and continually motivated her to study, while Sindhu’s husband guided her in improving her Nepali, enabling her to better navigate a system centered on the national language. Similarly, Sharmila Kumari Ram recounted how, despite initial difficulties stemming from her use of Maithili at home, the encouragement of teachers and classmates enabled her to overcome these linguistic barriers. Reema Baitha reflects on her schooling experience:

“One woman, Niru, a woman in the locality, encouraged my mother to send me to school, and that is how I began attending regularly. However, my inability to speak Nepali made me a target of ridicule among classmates, and on many occasions, I ran away from school. Teachers would also physically punish me when I failed to understand the meaning of certain words. Despite these challenges, with the support of some friends and a few teachers, I was able to continue my studies and eventually completed Grade 12” (Reema Baitha, personal interview).

Peer and community networks functioned as vital mechanisms of support in Sindhu’s educational journey. During her student years, she relied on Bhojpuri-speaking classmates to help her comprehend lessons that were otherwise delivered exclusively in Nepali. Later, as a teacher, she deliberately replicated this model of mutual assistance by offering instruction to girls from her community during the COVID-19 lockdown. This practice embodied an “each one, teach one” philosophy, whereby the knowledge gained by one individual was shared to uplift others within the community. Such reciprocal learning networks underscore the collective strategies of resilience developed by marginalized groups in contexts of systemic exclusion. As Sindhu explained:

“The medium of instruction in secondary education was Nepali. However, whenever we encountered difficulties in understanding, teachers would explain in Bhojpuri, which made comprehension easier” (Sindhu Mahara, personal interview).

Beyond community support, engagement with Dalit organizations further expanded access and opportunities. Sindhu’s association with the Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO) not only provided her with a professional platform but also enhanced her confidence and extended her networks. Through FEDO, she was able to re-enter higher education, illustrating how institutional advocacy by Dalit-led organizations can effectively complement and reinforce familial and community-based support structures. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of linguistic capital, these narratives show how Nepali-only schooling produced ridicule and punishment, yet empowerment emerged through enabling conditions. Supportive peers, bilingual teacher practices, and community networks allowed Madhesi Dalit women to accumulate and negotiate linguistic resources. Such strategies can challenge symbolic hierarchies and expand educational belonging [2].

A central strategy employed by Madhesi Dalit women in navigating systemic barriers was the cultivation of inner strength to resist societal ridicule. Both Sindhu and Kunti emphasized their deliberate choice to “ignore” negative comments and mockery, using this defiance as a means of preserving dignity and determination. Kunti’s direct confrontation with her son’s teacher – challenging casteist remarks and advocating for a pedagogy of care – represents a profound act of reclaiming agency. As she explained:

“People mocked me for attending campus while wearing a sari and covering my head with a veil, saying such things were inappropriate. But I ignored their comments and remained determined, because deep inside I felt an unfulfilled urge to pursue education. Witnessing the conditions of both my parental and marital families, and observing the systemic discrimination faced by the Chamar community, further strengthened my resolve to study. I wanted to understand why such discrimination persisted and believed that education was the key. Later, I learned to ride a bicycle and began attending tuition classes in a neighboring village. The tutor there was very supportive, and with his guidance, I was able to pass Grade 8 with good marks. This gave me great encouragement and helped me realize that I was not incapable of learning – the challenge was only the language. With that confidence, I continued my education with determination” (Rabidas, personal interview).

Another important strategy was the purposeful acquisition of Nepali. For Binita, who had once been punished for her weak command of the language, choosing to major in Nepali during her Bachelor’s degree transformed a source of exclusion into a tool of empowerment. Similarly, Madhu described how fluency in Nepali elevated her status within the community:

“Today, in my village, people from my community respect me for my ability to speak Nepali fluently. Whenever outsiders – whether hill-origin Nepali speakers or officials from development projects – visit our village, the community asks me to interpret their words and intentions. My role in translation has strengthened my confidence and improved my access to opportunities. For example, during a Holi program organized by Dalit women, I was invited to deliver a speech in Nepali. After I spoke, both the organization and the women present honored me. Mastering the Nepali language has made it significantly easier to secure work and opportunities in our area” (Mahara, personal interview).

In this way, language, once a site of oppression, became an instrument of empowerment and a means of building social capital. This linguistic resilience extended into their professional lives, where women such as Sindhu and Reema Baitha engaged in quiet forms of pedagogical resistance. By teaching in Bhojpuri, they subverted the imposed dominance of Nepali and ensured comprehension among their students. As Reema reflected: “I realized that they understood concepts much more easily when explained in their mother tongue” (Baitha, personal interview).

Such practices constituted a subtle but powerful form of pedagogical rebellion, representing a conscious effort to challenge linguistic hierarchies while supporting the next generation. Over time, the struggles of these women evolved from individual survival to collective empowerment. Binita expressed the inspiration her presence brought to children in her community: “Our sister has come, now we must study” (Majhi, personal interview). Similarly, Kunti articulated a broader vision of communal progress: “It is not enough for me alone to study; it is equally important to uplift my entire community. We must move forward collectively” (Rabidas, personal interview).

Sindhu’s role as a translator for her community further exemplifies how personal educational achievements can be transformed into communal resources, enabling marginalized groups to negotiate with outsiders and development institutions more effectively. Binita further elaborated on her own journey:

“After completing Grade 12, I remained idle for nearly two years due to financial constraints. I worked as a daily laborer and farmer, saving enough to begin my Bachelor’s studies, choosing Nepali as my major because my weak grasp of the language had caused earlier discrimination. At first, I struggled even to understand words, but with persistence, I improved. While studying, I briefly taught at a boarding school, but was dismissed for not inspiring hill students. Despite setbacks, I progressed, though one Psychology exam remains. Coming from the Musahar community, with no literate family members, my educational journey was full of obstacles” (Majhi, personal interview).

Her account illustrates how persistence in the face of systemic exclusion not only enabled her personal advancement but also generated symbolic value for her community. Taken together, these narratives are not merely accounts of individual triumphs but a searing critique of an educational system that marginalizes on the basis of caste, gender, and language. They underscore the urgent need for mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), along with mandatory training for educators in caste and gender sensitivity, inclusive pedagogy, and anti-discrimination practices. At the same time, structural support such as scholarships, mentorship programs, and institutional backing for first-generation Dalit students must be strengthened to reduce systemic inequities. The message articulated by these women is clear: while individual determination may break down barriers, genuine equity requires transforming the system itself. Their resilience deserves recognition, but such extraordinary perseverance should never have been required for access to a basic human right. These narratives can be theoretically understood through Bourdieu’s theory which highlights dominant languages like Nepali is taken into social and educational legitimacy, while mother tongues of Madhesi Dalit women are sidelined. Their persistence transforms personal capital into communal symbolic value, directly challenging structural exclusion [2].

6. Discussion

One of the most significant barriers created by the hegemony of a single national language was the systematic silencing of intellectual participation, a phenomenon that Frederick H. Gaige [7] situates within the politics of nation-building. Gaige’s analysis reveals that the institutionalization of Nepali as the sole medium of instruction was not a neutral educational reform but a deliberate strategy to forge national unity – an agenda that came at the cost of marginalizing linguistic diversity, especially in the Tarai region. For Madhesi Dalit women, this linguistic imposition is manifested in deeply exclusionary educational experiences. Students who spoke marginal languages such as Maithili, Bhojpuri, or Awadhi were subjected to ridicule, bullying, and physical punishment for mispronouncing Nepali words. Such acts of humiliation were not isolated incidents of poor pedagogy but part of a broader pattern of structural exclusion that Gaige identifies as cultural domination under the guise of linguistic standardization.

These acts of linguistic suppression had multiple, compounding effects. At the individual level, they diminished students’ confidence, limited classroom participation, and in many cases precipitated school or college dropouts. At the community level, they weakened parents’ trust and attachment to educational institutions, as schools came to be perceived not as spaces of learning but as environments that devalued their linguistic and cultural identities. This reflects Gaige’s argument that language policy is inherently po-

litical, influencing not only the medium of instruction but also the distribution of social power and access to knowledge. For Madhesi Dalit women, such exclusion was further amplified by caste-based discrimination. Their frequent poor academic performance – a consequence of inadequate language support – was misinterpreted as an indication of intellectual incapacity. This misinterpretation was reinforced by casteist attitudes and low expectations from educators, as illustrated in remarks like, “This Chamar girl will never understand, no matter how much she studies”.

This double marginalization – on the basis of caste and language – embodies what contemporary scholars describe as intersectionality, whereby multiple forms of oppression interact to deepen exclusion. Madhesi Dalit women, situated at the intersection of caste, gender, class, and linguistic marginality, face barriers that are both structural and experiential. Their challenges are compounded by gendered socio-economic realities: most come from impoverished, first-generation learner backgrounds, and face early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and economic deprivation. These conditions not only delay educational progress but also entrench inequalities, producing a cycle of marginalization that is difficult to break without systemic intervention. These intersecting exclusions further explain how dominant languages function as valued resources within education. Nepali-only schooling legitimizes certain linguistic competencies while devaluing Madhesi languages, reinforcing caste-gender hierarchies and reproducing structural inequality through everyday institutional practices [2].

Despite these entrenched barriers, Madhesi Dalit women have developed diverse and strategic forms of resistance. Their stories reveal that resilience is not merely individual perseverance but a collective practice forged in contexts of exclusion. They have cultivated networks of support – within families, peer groups, and community organizations – that function as alternative educational spaces. Spousal encouragement has played a decisive role for many, while encouragement from supportive teachers and classmates has helped overcome linguistic and social obstacles. Engagement with Dalit organizations has further expanded access to resources and opportunities, reflecting what Renukuntla and Gundemeda [24] identify in the Indian context as collective strategies to counteract linguistic disadvantage.

A particularly important strategy has been the deliberate mastery of Nepali. For Binita, who had once been punished for her weak command of the language, choosing Nepali as her major subject in higher education transformed a source of exclusion into a tool of empowerment. Binita’s decision to major in Nepali illustrates what Bourdieu calls the strategic accumulation of linguistic capital, whereby mastery of the dominant language becomes a means of negotiating symbolic power within unequal educational fields [2]. Yet, as Nepali scholars of inclusion and linguistic justice argue, such adaptation occurs within a historically casteist and centralized language regime that privileges Nepali while marginalizing Madhesi mother tongues [9], [8], [21], [17]. Thus, Madhesi Dalit women’s appropriation of Nepali reflects both constraint and resistance: compelled to operate within hegemonic structures, they simultaneously convert exclusion into collective symbolic empowerment, challenging entrenched caste-language hierarchies.

In line with Gaige’s theoretical framing [7], the experiences of Madhesi Dalit women illustrate that language barriers in education cannot be understood in isolation from the broader politics of language and identity. These barriers are deeply embedded in historical state policies that privileged Nepali as the dominant medium of national integration, thereby marginalizing linguistic diversity and reinforcing pre-existing social hierarchies. Gaige’s analysis, together with more recent scholarship such as Pradhan and Gupta [23], highlights the pressing need for inclusive language policies in higher education – policies that recognize and affirm linguistic plurality while actively working to dismantle structural inequities. For Madhesi Dalit women, meaningful educational equity cannot be reduced to the valorization of individual resilience; rather, it demands systemic transformation that addresses the intersecting axes of caste, gender, language, and regional identity. Crucially, the effectiveness of such policy interventions lies not merely in their formulation but in their translation into practice – a process that remains deeply shaped by the politics of ruling elites, who predominantly represent higher-class, high-caste, male, and hill-based constituencies.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the educational trajectories of Madhesi Dalit women are profoundly shaped by the politics of language in Nepal. Positioned at the intersection of caste, gender, class, and region, these women encounter systemic exclusion that is reinforced by the hegemony of Nepali as the dominant language of schooling. Their narratives reveal that language is not merely a medium of instruction but a gatekeeping mechanism that entrenches cultural hierarchies and perpetuates structural inequality. The imposition of Nepali – coupled with the privileging of hill-centric cultural values – creates both academic and emotional barriers, silencing intellectual participation and undermining self-confidence. When compounded by caste-based discrimination, gendered expectations, and economic precariousness, this linguistic exclusion constitutes a multilayered system of oppression that restricts access to higher education.

At the same time, the strategies employed by Madhesi Dalit women illustrate remarkable resilience and agency. From leveraging spousal and community support to engaging with Dalit organizations, these women have constructed alternative networks of care and solidarity in the absence of institutional support. Their efforts to transform the very language of their marginalization into a tool of empowerment, alongside their pedagogical practices of translanguaging and mother-tongue advocacy, reflect both defiance and innovation. Importantly, their shift from individual struggle toward collective uplift signals a broader vision of liberation that extends beyond personal achievement to the transformation of community futures.

The findings underscore the urgent need for mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) that not only accommodates but actively values Nepal's linguistic diversity. While legal and constitutional provisions recognize the right to education in one's mother tongue, implementation remains weak, hampered by inadequate teacher training, limited resources, and persistent elite resistance. Without structural reforms, the burden of adaptation will continue to fall disproportionately on marginalized students. True educational equity requires dismantling entrenched hierarchies, investing in inclusive pedagogies, and institutionalizing multilingual practices across all levels of education.

The struggles of Madhesi Dalit women make visible the deep fractures within Nepal's education system, revealing how a project designed in the name of national unity has in practice perpetuated exclusion. Far from being a neutral space of learning, education has historically functioned as a vehicle for privileging dominant languages and cultures while systematically silencing marginalized identities. Within this context, the lived experiences of Madhesi Dalit women expose the profound limitations of a homogenizing national education project. Their narratives are not merely accounts of perseverance but sharp indictments of a system that compels extraordinary resilience to access what should be a universal right. Addressing these entrenched inequities demands more than incremental reforms; it requires a paradigmatic rethinking of education as a site of justice, equity, and empowerment. Such a shift must position linguistic and cultural pluralism at the heart of Nepal's democratic future, treating diversity not as a problem to be managed but as a resource for building an inclusive and just society.

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